

## Sweet Jane by MonsterSquad

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**Summary:**

"Heavenly wine and roses seem to whisper to me when you smile..."

Eleven escaped the lab but never met the boys and has grown up alone, having to do what she can to get by. She has managed to get into college, her math and science skills exceeding those of even some professors. She meets Mike in a chemistry lab where they have to be partners and work together. He knows her as Jane. Will she open up to him about her secret and maybe no longer feel so alone? Will he ever find the owner of a journal he found and has been reading, wanting to know more about the sad protagonist of it who keeps referring to themselves in the text as abnormal, but Mike has read enough comic books to be both suspicious and excited.

## 1. Chapter 1

His shoes made squeaking sounds on the pristine floors of the chemistry building as Mike Wheeler headed to his organic chemistry lab. He was running a little behind schedule. As he rounded the corner into the adjacent hallway something caught his eye. There was an alcove with a couple of chairs and he noticed that underneath one of the chairs was a black and white composition book. He stopped abruptly, causing his shoes to squeak yet again, and picked up the book. He thought later when he had time he would see if there was a name inside it and try to return it to the owner. It was what he'd want to happen if *he'd* lost his journal.

When he entered the lab everyone looked up at him. He was clearly late. The professor only looked slightly annoyed as it was the beginning of the fall semester and students were still learning their routes to their various classes. Mike scanned the room for an empty seat. The only one left available was near the back of the classroom on the left. There was a girl sitting alone at the two person lab table, her head bent down and pouring over a textbook. Mike headed in her direction.

He listened as the professor explained what the lab would accomplish over the semester, what experiments they would be doing, what hypotheses they would be testing. The lab was twice a week for three hours each, this one on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mike could feel the girl sitting next to him, could tell when she shifted in her seat, could tell if she turned her head. When he had taken his seat she had looked up at him and he had time to think *really pretty* before the professor started talking. He spent the next fifteen minutes trying *not* to look at her directly.

Finally the students were given their assignment for the day, which basically was to get to know their equipment and their lab partner.

“So, um, I’m Mike. Mike Wheeler. I guess we’ll be working together.”

She looked at him, her eyes bright but sad. “I guess so.” Her voice

was quiet so Mike pressed on.

“What’s your name?” He asked.

She sighed, looking at him from her seat, her head turned to face him. “It’s Jane. I don’t think it suits me but it’s what my mother named me.” She turned her head back toward her book.

“Well, what’s your last name?” He persisted.

“It’s Hawkins.”

“Hey, that’s cool! My hometown is called Hawkins!” Mike’s smile spread across his face. “Where are you from?”

The girl, Jane, looked apprehensive. “Um, I moved around a lot. I don’t really call any one place home.”

Mike could see that if he wanted to know something about this girl he was going to have to work for it. He watched her for a minute or two as she toyed with a pipette.

“What do you like to do for fun?” Mike rummaged through his backpack and found a comic book.

“Fun? I don’t get out a lot.” She looked down at her notebook, though nothing was written in it. Mike frowned.

“What about your friends?”

“I don’t really have any friends.” Now Jane definitely didn’t look back up at him. Mike felt like an idiot. He looked down at his comic book and thumbed through the pages.

“What’s that?” Jane asked.

“X-Men #1. It’s a reprint though. If I had the real one I wouldn’t carry it around in my backpack.” Mike laughed. “It’s the first appearance of Jean Grey. I think she’s cool.”

“What makes her cool? What’s an X-Man?”

*Does she seriously not know who the X-Men are?* The feeling of getting to introduce someone to one of his favorite comics was almost overwhelming.

“The X-Men are a group of superheroes, mostly mutants. They fight crime and bad mutants. They’re pretty awesome.” Mike flipped through the book to show her pictures.

“Mutants?”

“Well, like, they were born with this special gene that makes them different. They each have different special abilities or things that set them apart. Professor Xavier found most of them and started a school for them because the government wanted to kill them all. You know, because they think different is bad and they’re afraid of real power.”

“But you’re not?” Her whole face seemed to question him.

“Definitely not. I wish there really were mutants. Like Jean Grey, for example. She’s telekinetic, which means she can move stuff with her mind, and she’s telepathic. I think it would be pretty amazing to know someone who could do that. I wish *I* could do that.” Mike’s voice got more quiet. He was looking down at his comic and didn’t see how Jane was looking at him, how her eyes seemed more moist than before. As he looked back up she quickly turned her head away from him, becoming suddenly very interested in a rack of test tubes.

“So what do you do to pass the time at home if you don’t go out much?” Mike changed the subject, thinking that she seemed a little more down than when he had first started talking to her.

“I don’t know. I guess I like to write. It’s nothing important. I just put my feelings on paper. Sometimes it helps me, sometimes not.”

“I get it. I like to do that too. I used to write D&D campaigns for my friends. Even if it’s nothing that anyone else likes, it feels good to try

to be creative. It's nice to tell a story." Mike thought back to his favorite campaigns.

"D&D?" She didn't seem to be up on the popular culture of the past twenty years.

"Dungeons & Dragons. It's a role playing game with goblins and orcs and elves and fairies. We were a little bit nerdy."

"Mike, look around. This is the University of Chicago. I think everyone in this room is *a little bit nerdy* in some way."

It was the first thing she had said that was accompanied by a smile and Mike thought he might explode right there in the chem lab. Her eyes twinkled and the corners of her mouth turned up and *oh, my god, she has dimples!*

For the remainder of the lab that day Mike's brain played him a continuous loop of the only song he knew by the Cowboy Junkies. *Heavenly wine and roses seem to whisper to me when you smile...*

*Sweet Jane*

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Eleven was seated at a table by herself waiting for her chemistry lab to begin when suddenly the door opened and in walked a tall, lanky boy with pale skin and black hair that looked like it wouldn't be out of place on a Muppet. She thought it was adorable but if her life had taught her anything, *adorable* wasn't a word that would be associated with her. She quickly realized that the only seat left was next to her and he was walking in her direction. She looked down at her textbook. Right before he sat down she allowed herself to look up at him.

*His eyes are beautiful.*

She dismissed the thought and looked back down. Blessedly the professor began speaking then and she had something else to focus

her attention on. She found it to be difficult though. She was feeling antsy now and couldn't point out why. She shifted and all but squirmed in her seat.

*Stop acting like an 8-year-old, Eleven.*

When the professor told them to get to know their partner she felt uneasy, not because she didn't want to get to know him (*she so did want that*), but she was afraid of what he might ask her. She didn't like her name but couldn't tell him what she called herself so she said her name was Jane, it still feeling foreign coming from her lips. She also couldn't tell him the real story behind her last name. It was just too unbelievable. And it had to be a coincidence that his hometown was called Hawkins. It had to be.

But then he started talking about his comic book and she saw how his face lit up. She didn't really know anything about comics, had never even *heard* of the X-Men, but as he told her about them she was instantly intrigued. He seemed so excited when he was telling her about their powers. He seemed awed by them and unafraid. She felt an alarming warmth in her chest that was grossly out of place.

She had told him about her writing. She didn't know why she had done that, it was something that was only *hers* but she felt like she could trust him. It wasn't like he was ever going to read anything of hers anyway. Her favorite part of the lab that day was when he said something about how he and his friends were a little nerdy and she made a joke about how everyone there was a little nerdy. The way he had looked at her, laughing genuinely, his eyes never leaving hers, had made her feel woozy. She thought she could definitely go for feeling that way again.

When the lab was over the sun had started to set. She was packing her things into her backpack.

"I'll see you Thursday?" He was standing beside her. She now could see that he towered over her. She could smell his cologne.

"Thursday." She gave him a weak smile.

The colors of fall were already starting to creep onto the trees on campus, the ivy covered buildings offset by the changing trees making it look like something from an idealistic movie about college. She was almost at the bottom of the steps outside when she heard him call to her again.

“Hey, Jane?”

She stopped and turned around.

“Want me to walk you home? It’s getting dark.”

*Yes. But you can’t. I can’t show you that.*

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine. It’s not far.” She offered him a little more of a smile.

“Um, okay. If you’re sure.” She noticed that he looked a little defeated.

“Maybe some other time. Thanks, Mike. See you Thursday.”

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Mike had almost forgotten about the journal. He was taking his books from his bag when he noticed it again. He thumbed through the pages and noticed that it was pretty full, page after page of small, neat handwriting. He only wanted to find a name inside but his eyes betrayed him and he found himself reading it. It was a passage in the middle of the journal and he found it captivating.

*I didn’t want to lie about it but it was the only way I could live anywhere. I needed documents for identification. The computer part was easy and I feel guilty but I have no one so I don’t know what else I was supposed to do. I can’t let them find me and if I try to go to the government I might as well resign myself to being a lab experiment again. I kind of hate my name but it’s all I have from my mother. I can’t use her last name because it would be too easy for them to put the pieces together so I used*

*the name of the only town I could ever call home, even though it wasn't really a home. I like to think about what kinds of friends I might have made if I had been allowed to be a regular kid there.*

*Getting into school was easy. I didn't have to bend any rules there, though I am bending them as far as they can go to pay for it. I'm probably breaking rules. Well, not probably, I'm totally breaking rules but I have to. At least my upbringing made me good at science and math. I want to understand why I am the way I am though so that's what I'm doing at college. Or trying to do.*

Mike felt like he was spying on someone. Surely this was some sort of fiction but it felt real and raw and like someone just putting thoughts into a journal. He forced himself to stop reading. There was no name indicated anywhere on it, just *The 011 Journals* written in the same neat handwriting on the front of the book. He put the journal back into his backpack and sat back on his bed. His thoughts turned quickly to Jane. He wondered what she sounded like when she laughed. He decided to make it his mission to find out.

On Thursday he made sure not to be late to lab. He and Jane worked on their experiment, the recrystallization of Phthalic acid. Mike thought she looked cute in her safety goggles. Once they had transferred their crystals and had done everything the experiment required, with Jane recording all of their findings on a sheet of paper, they put the crystals in the drawer of their table to allow them to dry, which was a long process that would yield their final product by the time of their next lab. Mike looked at the sheet of paper to see the volumes and measurements Jane had recorded.

*Hmm. Something seems familiar about this. Weird.*

They still had some time left over so they chatted about random things. Eleven had never really just sat and chatted with someone. She hoped she didn't look silly.

She found out that he had two sisters and was the middle child. Eleven didn't want to go too in depth about her past but she did tell him that she had pretty much raised herself, that her parents were



both dead and she was putting herself through college.

“You’re putting yourself through college *here* and you don’t have anyone? How are you doing that?”

She hadn’t expected him to ask that. She had been feeling rather open talking to him and quickly shut herself off.

“I had some money saved up.” Her entire demeanor changed and she knew it. She felt bad, having been having a nice time talking with him. She couldn’t let him know how she was paying for school though. She was sure he would frown on white collar crimes.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m not judging you. I’m sorry you don’t have anyone.” Mike patted her back. It was the most contact she’d had in as long as she could remember and she felt herself leaning into it without even realizing it.

As much as she wanted to continue feeling his hand on her back she pulled herself away, giving him a shy smile. She concentrated on tying her shoe while her heart returned to its normal rhythm.

Their exchanges went back and forth in much the same way for the next couple of weeks. Mike would ask her questions that either she would answer or be vague about, but he found that even when she was vague he still enjoyed talking to her. Getting her to open up to him was a challenge he was happy to accept. They did their work and she recorded their findings.

As they were filing out of the lab one day Mike pulled her aside, gently tugging on her arm. Eleven felt her stomach drop.

“Do you want to go get something to eat with me? It’s not a date or anything, I’m not being weird. I just don’t want to eat alone and I don’t have any food at my apartment so I get to either eat alone or go to the grocery store, and I don’t want to go there tonight? Would you come with me? I’ll sing for you. Please?”

He was wearing the most endearing dopey grin as he asked and before she knew what was happening Mike started singing a song she

had never heard but that was in no way unpleasant. He was singing quietly so he wouldn't call attention to himself.

*Anyone who's ever had a heart  
Wouldn't turn around and break it  
And anyone who's ever played a part  
Wouldn't turn around and hate it  
Sweet Jane, sweet Jane  
Sweet, sweet Jane*

Eleven had never been asked to go out to eat with *anyone*, and certainly no one had ever sung to her. She wasn't sure she would even know what to do, but his eyes looked so kind and his voice was so soft and his hand was still on her arm. She could feel the heat of his palm through her sweater. She nodded.

They ended up going to a little dive that had some of the best burgers in town, or so the sign promised. They snagged a booth at the back of the place.

"If you want to share something we can. They have some really good cheese sticks. They're big." Mike's eyes widened as he said this and Eleven found herself wanting to laugh at his silly expression, but she kept her composure.

"I like cheese sticks."

They ordered some mozzarella sticks and a burger for each of them and talked while they waited.

"Where do you live? I'm not being creepy, I'm just making conversation. I'm not going to invade your domicile or anything."

The way he said it, so nonchalantly, using the word *domicile*, struck her as funny and she laughed.

Mike watched as her face lit up and she threw her head back slightly, her mouth both smiling and open, and listened as her laugh filled his ears. It was the sound he would currently choose as his favorite sound in the world.

Their cheese sticks arrived and their fingers touched as they both reached into the basket at the same time. Jane withdrew her hand first.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. They’re really hot anyway.” Mike took a cheese stick from the basket and quickly set it on her plate, blowing on his fingers afterwards. She smiled at him again and he thought some minor burns to his fingers were well worth it.

Mike found that he dominated most of the conversation but that she didn’t seem to mind. She answered questions when he asked them but otherwise was content to listen to him tell her all about his childhood, playing with his friends in the forest, about science fair projects and his favorite teachers in school.

Eleven was happy to listen to him. He would get excited quickly when remembering another anecdote that he wanted to tell her. She liked watching his brows bunch together when he was thinking and how his eyes would dance when he was telling her about something he thought was really special. She learned about his friends and where they had gone to college and why he was there alone. She learned that he wanted to be a neurologist. She learned that he did not have a girlfriend.

“That seems strange.” Eleven said as she took a bite of her burger.

“What does?”

“You don’t have a girlfriend. I find that to be odd.”

“Yeah, um, girls think I’m dorky I guess. I’m too tall and I ramble on about everything and I’m into some really nerdy things that I don’t think girls find attractive.”

Eleven sipped her soda. She looked thoughtful. “Maybe those are the wrong girls.”

They walked back onto campus and Mike realized that she had never told him where she lived. It was totally dark now except for the streetlights on campus. *Rape lights*, the students called them but Mike had always thought they looked more like their purpose was so that rapists could see what they were doing. He didn't want to leave Jane to walk alone.

"Shall I squire you home?" He offered her his arm and Eleven almost laughed again at his wording. She placed her hand in the crook of his elbow as he offered it to her. She thought it felt strange to be touching him but it was a feeling she knew she liked.

She allowed him to walk her to the dormitory. It was nestled just beside a couple of other buildings and near a library. She used her ID to let herself into the building, swiping it through the censor. She waved at Mike from just inside the doorway and watched him walk away. Once he was out of her sight she went back outside and walked down the sidewalk to the back of the library. With a flick of her head the door opened and she quickly went inside and up into the attic room she had found two years before. The security cameras went to static for a moment and then she was safely stowed away in the room she called home. She opened her laptop and searched for the name of the song that he had sung. She eased back on her cot, her blanket pulled around her, and let the gentle melody lull her to sleep.

When Mike got back home he decided to read some more from the journal he had found. It was unlikely that he would ever locate the owner and he thought it was very interesting and wanted to read more. He knew it was someone's private business but he wasn't doing it to be mean; he wanted to know more. It was better than anything on television so he justified it that way. If he ever had to explain himself he would simply say that it was better than television. He started at the beginning.

*I don't know if I'll ever not think of myself as Eleven. At least now I can write it as a word instead of a number. It's forever inked on me. It's who I am. It's the reason I have no one. I wonder what it's like to have a family. How does it feel to be hugged? I don't think I'll ever find out. I don't think I'm worth anyone's time. I'll just end up causing them pain*

*somehow because I'm abnormal. I haven't had anyone yet in my life, there's no reason for me to think that will change.*

*It was raining when I escaped. I was only 12 years old and I didn't know what to do or where to go so I just kept going. I was so cold and scared. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if someone had found me that night. Someone good who cared about me. But that's not what happened. I'm not proud to say that I stole a lot of things over the years...food, clothes, shelter. I was never anywhere for long. When I was almost 16 I used my skills, for lack of a better word, to infiltrate a government computer and that's how I got all of my legal documents. My birth certificate is forged. I don't know who my father was. I never knew my mother but I was able to find out who she was and what my name is. It's all I have from her.*

*What I want most in life is to understand how I can do the things I can do. I want to know why I'm so different from everyone else. Maybe I can someday change it and be just a regular person. I want to figure out everything I can about how my brain works and why it's not like the others.*

*And I don't want to be alone.*

There was a lot more but it was making Mike sad. He wanted to believe it was just a story but it seemed so real. He didn't want to fall asleep worrying about someone who may or may not even exist though, despite how his heart ached for them. He'd had a great time with Jane and hadn't been able to stop thinking about her. He knew she was guarded but he also knew that he had already decided that he would continue to make himself present in her life. There was something about her that he found infinitely appealing.

He was thinking of her, thinking of walking with her, of how her hand felt on his arm. He was almost asleep, but his last thought before drifting off was that he couldn't imagine how it would be to not know what a hug felt like.

*Why did I just think that?*

## 2. Chapter 2

As the weeks passed Eleven found that she was spending more and more time with Mike outside of the lab, but the strangest part to her was that she was enjoying it. She had always wanted friends, or at least *one* friend but had assumed that she would have so much anxiety and worry about doing something to give away her secret, doing something that would make her stand out as *weird*, that she had never pursued having any companionship. She liked how Mike could make her laugh, which was also new for her, and she liked how she felt comfortable around him. It was almost like she had always known him.

It was the week of Halloween. Mike and Eleven had started meeting for lunch on Wednesdays since she had calculus near where he had creative writing. They were eating sandwiches while sitting on the ground underneath a shady tree. Mike looked thoughtful and she noticed.

“What is it?” Eleven asked.

“Have you seen the flyers up about all the Halloween parties they’re throwing this weekend?”

Eleven had noticed them but a party was the last place that she ever really wanted to be. Well, *almost* the last place.

“I saw them.”

“Would you want to go to one? I love Halloween.” Mike looked at her rather hopefully.

She sighed. “I really don’t do parties, Mike. I don’t think I’d feel comfortable. I get really nervous around groups of people I don’t know.” She knew she was disappointing him, she just *knew* it.

But Mike smiled. “That’s okay, Jane. We don’t have to go. I do love Halloween though. Would you want to come over and watch horror movies with me on Friday?”

“Just me and you?”

“Well, yeah. I don’t want a lot of people trashing my place. It would be just us. We could order pizza or whatever and watch movies. I don’t think I’ll have any trick-or-treaters.”

Eleven thought about it. She had never watched a movie with someone. There were a lot of things she had never done but watching a few movies with Mike sounded like it might be fun. It sounded better than sitting alone in her attic space and waiting for a reason to go back outside.

“I could do that.” Her expression got more positive with each nod of her head.

“You should give me your phone number so I can give you directions to my place.” Mike realized he had never asked her.

“Oh, um, I don’t have a phone. It’s an expense that’s just too frivolous for me since no one would call me anyway. I could give you my email address.”

Mike watched as she pulled her backpack around to her side and unzipped it. She removed a black and white composition book and suddenly his mouth went dry. She ripped a sheet of paper from the back of it and began to write her email address.

“These books were cheap so I picked up a few. I like to write in them.” Eleven hadn’t noticed how Mike looked paler than normal. She handed him the sheet of paper.

Mike took the paper she offered him, his fingers brushing against hers. He wasn’t sure but he felt like his mouth was hanging open. His eyes met hers and he noticed that she was looking at him with concern.

“Are you okay? You look like you’re about to faint.”

Mike pulled himself together. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just got a little

wobbly is all.” He looked down at the paper and thought his heart might stop. Written in what he could swear was the same handwriting as the journal he had found weeks ago was Jane’s email address.

*Sorryrightnumber@outlook.com*

She could see that he still looked like he didn’t feel well. “Are you sure you’re okay?” She leaned over and put her hand on Mike’s forehead, checking for fever. “You’re not too warm but you are a little clammy. You should rest. I have to go anyway.” She started packing up her things and Mike watched her, his brain linking his ideas together slowly, starting to form a solid thought. “I’ll see you in lab tomorrow?” She had stood up from her spot on the grass, backpack slung lazily over her shoulder. She was looking down at him.

The sun behind her was causing a backlight effect and made it look like she was wearing a halo. Mike was reminded again of how beautiful this girl was. He no longer felt shocked, he felt warm. He smiled up at her.

“Definitely. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mike spent all of Wednesday night finishing the portions of the journal he’d not yet read. He had to know if it was true. *Am I just forcing coincidences? Am I making something out of nothing? What if Jane is Eleven?* He hoped to find more clues in the text of the journal.

He found the passage where the abilities the person had were highlighted and explained, at least as best as they could. He read it twice.

*Moving things is easier now that I’m older. I don’t get nosebleeds much anymore. The relationship I seem to have with computers is new for me as I was never allowed near them when I was young. It’s like I know exactly what to do, the binary codes come so naturally to me and I can interact with the computers as though they are people. But unlike people, computers always do what I ask. It made it easy for me to secure school*



*funding.*

*I can do other things but I want to be a good person. There have been plenty of times when I wanted to see what someone was doing or hear what they were saying but I always stop myself. That's too intrusive. I would only do it if I absolutely had to. It reminds me too much of back then.*

*It's the times when I'm angry that scare me. That's the main reason I try to stay by myself. If I got mad and did something in the heat of my rage and someone got hurt I could never forgive myself. And then there's always the chance that someone could see. If that happened it could be the end of my life as I currently know it. They would definitely lock me away. They would do that even if no one got hurt. Just someone seeing what I can do could end my freedom forever.*

Mike felt sick, not because he thought his friend might be the one who had written the journal, but because the person sounded so hopeless about it. If it was Jane then it would break his heart to know that she felt worthless and alone and like she could never be truly happy because of how she perceived herself and assumed others would as well.

He started to think of things he could ask that would seem innocent enough but help him decide if she had written the words in the journal. She would be at his place in a couple of days so he knew he would have time to casually steer the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go.

Eleven let herself start to feel excited when she got an email from Mike with the directions to his house. She had been trying to push the feelings deep down, not wanting to disappoint herself, but she finally was beginning to feel a good type of anxious bubble up inside her. Watching movies at a friend's house was an activity that *regular* people did, that *normal* people did. She couldn't wait. Anticipating something good was another new thing. Mike was checking off a lot of firsts on her list of life moments.

Mike had emailed her again on Friday afternoon to see what sort of

food she wanted him to order for dinner. She said pizza, knowing it was probably the most ordinary and normal food that college kids ate. She wanted her entire night to feel normal. She said he could choose the toppings. Growing up the way she had, she had learned over the years not to be picky and to be happy just to have food in whatever form it took.

She arrived at Mike's apartment a little before 6:00. It was already dark out and the Chicago winds had started to blow very cold. Mike let her in and took her coat. She looked around at his living room, such stark contrast to the place she called home. There was a comfortable looking sofa with a coffee table sitting in front of it. Mike's television was pretty large. He explained that it made playing video games with his friends over their long distances apart much more fun. His walls were adorned with movie posters she didn't really recognize.

"This is the Japanese *Halloween* poster. The 1978 *Halloween*, not the atrocity that was the 2007 one." He pointed to a blue poster with some art depicting a menacing masked man with a butcher knife. "And this one is the *Scream Factory* cover for their release of *Firestarter*. I think it looks cool and it's also a great book."

Eleven looked at the poster. It depicted a small girl standing with her back to the viewer, looking at a burning barn. Her hair seemed to be blowing around the sides of her face, no doubt caused by the heat of the fire she was near. Mike saw how she studied the poster.

"Her name is Charlie and she can start fires with her mind. She's just a little kid. The government is after her so her father runs away with her to try to keep her safe. She can't always control her abilities and bad things sometimes happen." Mike had actually not planned on having such a perfect opportunity to put Jane at ease about possible powers but the poster was a great way to talk about her without actually *talking* about her.

"Does she have a happy ending?" Jane asked quietly.

"She does. It's not perfect but she's safe and no one is after her anymore." Mike smiled at Jane, the relief evident on her face.

Eleven continued to look around the room. There were a couple of framed pictures, one of Mike and his family and one that had to be Mike and his friends.

“Are these your friends?” She picked up the frame and looked more closely at it.

“Yeah! This is Lucas, he’s the one at West Point right now, and the curly haired guy is Dustin. He stayed in Indiana and so did Will, who is right here.” Mike pointed to each of them as he described them. “This is from when we won the science fair in the seventh grade.”

He sounded so excited telling her about his friends. She glanced away from the picture, back to his face, and saw an older version of what she was holding in her hand. She had heard him say he was from Indiana but that had to be happenstance.

“You have the same smile.” Her eyes lit up. Mike turned red.

“Do you wanna get some pizza and start a movie?” Mike wanted to change the subject to something other than his face.

“Sure.”

Once they were settled comfortably on the sofa, sitting on opposite ends, their pizza on the coffee table in front of them, Mike started the movie. Eleven hadn’t really cared what they watched but now she was a little worried, having not seen a lot of horror movies in her lifetime. She didn’t want to look too scared or be startled and look foolish.

Mike noticed that she looked apprehensive.

“This one isn’t too bad. I thought we could watch *Halloween*. It’s one of my favorites. If you get scared just let me know. That’s not what I want.” Mike gave her a reassuring smile.

Eleven thought the movie was pretty good. There were only five kills in it anyway. She had seen worse in her life. She thought the music

might be the best part of it.

When the first movie was over Mike immediately suggested that they watch another. Eleven had thought she would be expected to go home after one movie. She agreed, not really wanting the night to end.

Before they started the next one Mike asked a few questions, making sure to just seem conversational.

“What was your favorite Halloween costume as a kid?” Mike asked.

“Um, I’ve never been trick-or-treating. I never had the chance.”

It was an answer he suspected but it still made his heart ache for her. He decided to pretend that it didn’t shake him.

“I loved dressing up. I was always something different. I was a zombie vampire one year, a Ghostbuster, a clown, once I was both Dr. Jekyll *and* Mr. Hyde. My face was split down the middle and each side was a different personality. Nancy helped me with the makeup with that one. She really rocked it. My mom has a lot of pictures.”

Thinking of Mike getting excited to be something different for Halloween each year, spending time and thought on his perfect costume, made Eleven smile. She had never had that but it was nice to think about someone she cared about getting to experience it.

*Wait, what, Eleven?*

Mike was continuing, “It doesn’t really count but I had my first kiss when I was 7 years old but we were both wearing masks so our lips didn’t really touch. Lucas dared me to kiss this girl in our neighborhood because she was dressed as a princess and I was a frog that year. Lucas told her that if she kissed me he’d let her choose three pieces of candy from his bucket and that I would turn into a prince. She kissed me but when I didn’t change into anything she ran away screaming. Lucas laughed.”

They were both standing in front of the shelf where Mike kept his movies, about to choose what to watch next.

Eleven laughed at Mike's story before she said, "I've never been kissed. Hell, I've never even been *hugged*." She immediately wished that she hadn't said so much.

Mike was certain now. He turned to look at her, facing her directly. She didn't meet his gaze.

"So you don't know what a hug feels like?" His voice was almost a whisper.

She finally looked back up at him and he noticed the tears in her eyes. She shook her head.

Eleven had looked up at Mike when she shook her head but had quickly looked back down at the floor. The next thing she felt was the sensation of being pulled into him, feeling his arms wrap around her, their length totally enveloping her. His chin was resting on the top of her head and he was squeezing her but it didn't feel restrictive. She felt comforted and supported and she could smell him, his cologne mixed with his soap creating a fragrance that she would now forever associate with *Mike*.

*Do not cry, Eleven. You are NOT going to cry.*

She started crying into his shirt but he continued to hold her. He rubbed her back as they stood there in Mike's living room.

"I'm sorry." Mike heard her mumble. Her face was pressed against him and she had moved her arms around his waist. She was holding on tightly to him.

"You don't have to be sorry. It's okay."

They stood for a couple of minutes longer, Mike letting her hold on to him for as long as she wanted to. She eventually pulled away from him a bit and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“What kind of person never gets hugged in their whole life?” She sounded disgusted.

“Hey, don’t be like that. You are awesome. If no one ever hugged you then that’s *their* loss. Hugging you just now was easily the best thing I did this week.” He tried to cheer her up, and he wasn’t lying. Hugging her was something he wanted to keep doing. “Do you want to watch the movie now?”

“Do you think maybe you could hug me one more time first?”

Mike smiled. “I can do better than that. Let me put this movie in.” Eleven watched him choose a film. He pulled her with him back to the sofa but she was confused as they sat down, closer than before and with her on his left. Mike pressed play on the remote and then sat back against the cushions. Before Eleven could question him though he put his arm around her and pulled her into his side. She could feel the rhythm of his heart as her head leaned against his upper chest, her stature causing her to fit against him like she had once been a part of him. “Is it okay if we watch the movie like this?” He asked.

It was like one long, extended hug and Eleven felt happier than she had ever been in her lifetime. She felt at peace, safe, unafraid. She snuggled into him and sighed contentedly. It didn’t matter that *A Nightmare on Elm Street* turned out to be a little more scary than the first movie or that the room was dark except for the light coming from the television. She could hide her face in Mike’s shirt if she got scared and he never removed his arm. It was the best feeling she could think of ever having.

A little before Nancy’s final showdown with Freddy Krueger, Eleven fell asleep. She had been concentrating on the beating of Mike’s heart, the soothing rhythm making her feel drowsy, and had closed her eyes. Mike had been prepared for her to be startled in certain places but when she never moved he looked down and saw that she was asleep. He didn’t want to wake her, she looked so peaceful, so instead of watching the end of the movie he watched her breathe steadily, noticing the length of her eyelashes and the way her lips occasionally twitched into an almost smile.

They had both taken their shoes off when Jane had gotten to his place so Mike eased himself sideways as slowly as he could, being careful not to wake her. After some rearrangement he had them both lying on the sofa, Jane against him still. One of his legs was completely hanging off and he had it bent to support himself. He pulled a blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over her. It was late and cold outside, he wasn't going to let her go home in that.

Once he had finally gotten himself comfortable she shifted slightly. She had been near the back of the sofa once he had slid them both down and when she shifted it allowed him to move his other leg back up onto the furniture. Her left leg had moved over his thighs and he felt her snuggle even more into his side but she never woke. Mike was glad. He turned the television off and closed his eyes.

Some time in the night Eleven jolted awake. She was confused at first, wondering why she was lying almost on top of Mike, but then she remembered watching the movie and realized she must have fallen asleep. She felt a little embarrassed.

Mike felt her move and woke up as well.

"I'm so sorry, Mike. I didn't mean to fall asleep." She looked slightly panicked.

"It's fine. I didn't mind at all. You don't take up a lot of space." He chuckled and turned on a lamp.

"I should go home." Eleven sat up and started looking for her shoes.

"Now? It's the middle of the night and it's so cold out there. You can stay here. I'm sorry I slept on the couch with you. I should have gone to my own bed. I didn't want to wake you up and you were comfortable. I didn't mean to upset you."

Eleven's heart was racing, screaming at her to stay, but her mind was giving her reason after reason why she should leave immediately.

"I'm not upset. I have to go." She had put her shoes on and was grabbing her coat.

"Please don't!" Mike tugged her arm, gently, but in the wake of her embarrassment and her worry and the lingering sensation of having his arms around her, Eleven's brain acted out.

Both the bulb in the lamp and the one in the overhead light fixture exploded and the television turned itself back on. Eleven looked mortified. She ran out the door into the night.

Mike was not giving up easily though. He wasn't even wearing shoes but he ran after her, almost tripping on his way down the stairs.

"Jane! Please come back! I need to tell you something!" He could see her still, she wasn't sprinting, but he was and his long legs were quickly closing the gap between them.

When she felt his hand on her shoulder she turned around. She was already crying.

"Jane, come back. I want to show you something." His eyes pleaded with hers. She sighed and nodded.

"You ran after me with no shoes on?" She noticed his feet as they made their way back.

"Sometimes other people are more important."

When they got back inside Eleven sat on the sofa, looking expectantly at Mike. "What did you want to show me?" She was still feeling like she shouldn't be there but the idea of him running after her down the street in the dead of night with no shoes or coat on while the cold winds whipped around them made her want to be near him. He had gone into his bedroom for something and when he returned his hand was behind his back.

"Um, I hope you don't hate me. Let me explain everything first."



Mike ran his hand through his hair as he started the story of finding a journal on the floor of the chem building.

“So I never planned to read it. I was looking for a name so I could return it. I didn’t find a name but I also couldn’t help seeing some of the words and they drew me in. I wanted to know more. I felt like I wanted to protect the author even though it was clear that they could do things I cannot. I felt sad that they felt so alone and I wished I knew who it was, if it was even a real person, so I could try to be their friend. Something about it made me feel like I was *supposed* to be the one who had found it. Then when you gave me your email address I realized that your handwriting matches the handwriting in the journal. It caught me off guard but then you stood up and the sun was behind you and honestly you were the prettiest girl I had ever seen in that moment, like, ever, in television, movies, hands down you win, but I also thought about how unbelievably *nice* you are and how smart and I knew it didn’t matter what you might be able to do. I will always be here for you. Whatever you need. What I’m trying to say is you never have to hide. Not from me. I think you deserve to be normal and have friends and me knowing your secret will make it easier to not worry about doing things that I know you worry about doing. I’ll keep you safe, *Eleven*.”

He brought his hand from behind his back as he said her name. She couldn’t even focus on her journal appearing in front of her. Hearing him say her name, the name she used for herself, caused a fluttery sensation in her abdomen and her face felt warmer.

Mike set the journal in her lap and sat down next to her. She still hadn’t said anything since he had begun his story.

“It’s okay. I promise.” Mike whispered as he tentatively rubbed her back.

Eleven leaned into him and he moved his hand from her back to around her shoulder. He felt her trembling slightly.

“You feel okay?”

“I feel relieved.”

## Notes for the Chapter:

Yay! Eleven knows what a hug feels like now. I wonder if they'll ever kiss... Maybe they'll just be friends. Will Mike ever find out her living conditions? Will they realize they're from the same town? And what of these white collar crimes she mentioned? How will she resolve that without drawing attention to herself?

As always, thanks for reading and I hope it was enjoyable. I'll try to update soon.

### 3. Chapter 3

Mike and Eleven talked into the night. She had never had anyone to really discuss her life with and she quickly found that the more open she was with him the more comfortable she was talking about things she had always thought she would keep locked away forever in her mind.

“Does anyone else know? Does your roommate know?” Mike asked. They were still sitting on his sofa but she had removed her coat and shoes.

Eleven sighed. “I don’t have a roommate, Mike. I don’t even live where you think I do.”

Mike was confused because he had watched her use her ID to swipe herself into the building. Only people who lived in the dorms could do that.

“But you went inside when I walked you home.”

“I opened the door with my mind. You just watched me *pretend* to use the card. I didn’t want to show you where I *really* live.”

“Where do you *really* live then?”

Eleven thought about her answer. She didn’t want to seem like a criminal but she wanted to be honest with Mike.

“I live in the attic of the library that is next to where you thought my dorm was. I found the room a couple of years ago. I sneak in and out and on the weekends I can only go out if it’s nighttime because there are usually people there researching. There’s a bathroom that I use on the third floor but I have to scramble the security cameras and be really quick when I use it. I get up early in the morning, before the library opens, and I let myself out and wait for my first class somewhere I can find that is warm. I just read or write until I have class.”

“Why don’t you just live in a dorm like everyone else? Wouldn’t that

be easier?"

"Mike, I'm already doing some pretty shady things to pay for school. I don't want to add more to it. Living in a dorm would be another expense and I don't want to take too much." Eleven shrugged.

"What kinds of *shady* things?" Mike was a little worried.

"Computer stuff. My scores are all legitimate but my bill for tuition is paid in full and that's a total lie. I altered the numbers." Eleven's voice almost faltered while telling him, fearing that he would be mad at her admission.

Mike nodded his head, as though it made perfect sense for her to do that. "I understand. I mean, you did what you had to do. If the government used you as a test subject then I think that gives you the right to help yourself where you can. No one is being hurt by your education being free to you. There's absolutely no way that's the case. They just want money to keep up the appearance of their prestigious school. If it's cheap then it can't possibly be good, at least that's how colleges think."

Eleven's eyes brightened. "You're not mad?"

"Of course I'm not mad. I'm a little pissed that you have to live in a secret room with no real comforts though."

"It's okay. It's still better than what I grew up with."

Eleven had pulled her legs up underneath her and was sitting more comfortably on Mike's sofa. He thought she looked like she belonged there. He let the thought slide to the back of his mind. She pulled the blanket around her.

"Will you tell me about that? About before you escaped? I know what was in the journal but I'd like to hear it from you. If you're okay with it." Mike eased himself a little closer to her. She noticed that his feet were still bare and moved so that he could share the blanket with her.

“I was raised in a lab. My room was nothing, just four concrete walls. It was drab and I remember always being cold. I was treated like a specimen and given a number as a name.”

Mike interrupted her. “Oh yeah, I meant to ask, why do you call yourself Eleven?”

She pushed the sleeve of her shirt up slightly, revealing her left wrist, and held her arm out to Mike so he could see for himself. Mike took her wrist and ran his thumb over the numbers tattooed there, a small 011. His large hand easily wrapped around her wrist, his fingers resting over the ink, the brand that she had been given as though she were a piece of equipment, something owned by someone. He could feel her pulse.

“That’s why. It’s the name I knew. I got used to calling myself that.” She was so quiet, her eyes trained on his hand that was still on her wrist. “Anyway, they would make me do tests, trying to see what all I could really do. They wanted me to use my mind to kill small animals, which I refused to do so they locked me in a dark room. I remember screaming but no one ever came for me. I cried myself to sleep on the cold floor and the next day they took me back to my room. Then they acted like nothing had ever happened and made me do something else. They would make me spy on people in other countries or animate different objects. They would put me in an isolation tank full of water so I could focus everything on whatever my task was. I was always a little scared of that. It was dark. It always made me tired but they would push me more, until my nose was gushing blood and I was too tired to hold my head up anymore. Then I’d be put back in my room. Locked in.”

Mike’s heart was breaking hearing her tell him about her childhood, but she kept going and he thought maybe it was good for her to tell him about it. Writing in a journal is good but really talking to someone might be a better way for her to put it all behind her.

“How did you escape?”

Eleven rested her head on the back of the sofa. “I had to hurt a few people. I was 12 years old and there was some sort of major

computer glitch or a fire or something that had put everyone into a panic. I was being escorted from my room to the room where they did the tests but when everyone was running around trying to fix whatever the problem was, I slipped out of the hold of the people with me, bashing their heads together, and crawled into a vent. I followed the vent, pulling myself along on my stomach, and finally saw a place where I could exit but there were a couple of guards there. I had to kill them. I was running on adrenaline and once I knew they weren't in my way I ran outside and found a storm drain that I crawled into. It took me under the fence and into the forest. It was raining so hard that night. I didn't have shoes, I was wearing a hospital gown. My hair was buzzed down to almost nothing. They kept it that way to make it easier for them to track my brain waves with their machines. I don't even want to think about what I must have looked like."

Mike listened to her. He could definitely imagine what she might have looked like. He wished he'd been there to find her. He would have taken care of her. But that wouldn't have been a possibility. There was no way they would have ever met at 12 years old.

"And what did you do then? Where even was this lab?"

"I always made up stories in my head about the actual town where the lab was, or maybe it's still there. After I left I never had any bad feelings about the town itself. Those people didn't know what was going on in the lab. At least the majority of them didn't. I liked to imagine what it would be like to go to school with the other kids, to have friends, to ride bikes and play games and go exploring in the woods. I never imagined that I had tons of friends, just a few really close ones. That's all I wanted. It was called Hawkins and that's why my last name is Hawkins. For the town I was part of in my imagination."

Mike wanted to ask his next question but he was afraid of the answer. He was afraid that it would make him regret his life from when he was 12 to the present. He was afraid that he might have been able to help her if only he'd known.

"Where is Hawkins?" He asked quietly.

“In Indiana.” Eleven looked at him and their expressions matched.

Mike had known. Something had always nagged at the back of his mind but he hadn’t put it together. He knew exactly where the lab was in Hawkins. He had ridden past it many times on his bike. He could remember staring up at it, wondering what went on inside.

He took her hands in his and turned to face her. “That’s my hometown. I know about the lab, well, not all about it obviously, but I know where it is, I know the fence. I think I even know the storm pipe you crawled through. I’m so sorry I never knew you were there.”

His face looked pained and Eleven squeezed his hands back. “You couldn’t have done anything, Mike. You were just a kid too.”

“Still. The *what ifs* are haunting me right now.” He let go of her hands, knowing there was more to her story.

“We can’t worry about *what ifs*, Mike. We can only live in the *now*.”

“So what did you do? It was raining and you were all by yourself.”

“I stole some clothes, my first real clothes ever, from a store at the edge of town. It was night and there wasn’t even a security system. Or maybe there was one but it could only be triggered by a broken window or door. I didn’t have to break anything. It was as though I had a key. I took some jeans and a sweatshirt and socks and shoes, underwear. I dressed there and didn’t take more than I needed. I got a duffle bag and put some extra things in it. I didn’t know how to tie my shoes so the laces were always getting in my way. I saw a display of jackets so I took one, not even thinking about how cold it was about to get. It was almost wintertime but there was no snow yet. If there hadn’t been a display of coats I might not have thought to get one. When I had what I thought I’d need I found a place to hide until daylight and then I snuck onto a bus and went wherever it was going. It turned out to be Peoria, Illinois.”

Eleven told him about her time in Peoria, how she found a place to

stay and spent all of her time in the library trying to learn as much as she could. She had used her powers to help herself get by but she always knew that she wanted to go to college and she wanted the satisfaction of doing it herself, without the help of some weird thing her mind could do.

“When did you find out what your name really was?” Mike asked.

“I was researching the lab on microfiche in the library and found some articles and then once I had what I thought my mother’s name was I used the computer there to kind of hack into the government mainframe and that’s where I confirmed it and learned that her baby was named Jane. I knew it was me. I don’t know who my father was though. And I say I hacked into it but it wasn’t really like that. I can just ask a computer something using code I somehow know and I get what I ask for. I try not to rely on it.”

“But you still call yourself Eleven.”

“I don’t really love the name Jane. It’s okay but it’s never what I imagined my name was, you know, back when I daydreamed about a real life. Jane was never on the table.” She chuckled lightly.

“Well what do you want me to call you? I don’t hate the name Jane. I think it’s nice. But it’s your name, I’ll call you whatever you want.”

“I think you’ll have to call me Jane in public. Eleven would bring too much attention to me.”

Mike thought about her statement. He had always noticed how when he said her name, called her Jane, she flinched slightly, like it wasn’t really her name but she was answering to it anyway.

“Maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven.”

She nodded and smiled at him. He could see how sleepy she looked.

“Why don’t you go back to sleep? It’s almost 5:00 a.m. You can sleep in my bed and I’ll stay here.”



Eleven didn't want to take his bed but the idea of sleeping on a real mattress in a real bed was so appealing that she had to accept his offer. Mike showed her down the hallway to his room.

"The bathroom is right there and this room here is just extra. My mom wanted me to get a two bedroom apartment in case my sisters ever visited me, which is weird because I doubt either of them ever would. So it just has a bookshelf in it. Oh, and a beanbag." The room at the end of the hallway was Mike's room. "The sheets are pretty clean. I just did laundry a few days ago. I hope you're comfortable. Sleep as long as you want. Maybe tomorrow we can get breakfast or something."

"I'd like that." She sat down on his bed, the light from his bedside lamp causing her eyes to look even bigger.

Mike smiled at her. "Um, well, okay. Night, El."

"Night, Mike."

Mike ended up finding reasons that El should stay the rest of the weekend at his place, saying that it would be too risky to go back to her attic room on the weekend, that he wanted to hang out, that it was fun having her around. El didn't want to get too used to sleeping in a real bed or having a television to watch, a kitchen with food, a bathroom with a shower, but she let herself enjoy it for the weekend.

On Sunday night she went back to her room above the library. Mike had walked her back, saying that despite her being able to take care of herself he wanted to know that she didn't have any problems getting home. She showed him where she always waited before she went inside, a place that was hidden by bushes but offered a good view of the door and any oncoming foot traffic. They stood in her special hiding spot and said goodbye.

"Thanks for letting me stay this weekend. It was really nice," El said, looking up at Mike. It was a small space and for both of them to fit they had to stand facing each other, rather close together.

“I liked having you there. I get lonely sometimes. Thanks for trusting me.” Mike looked down at her.

“Well, I should go inside. The coast looks pretty clear. Um, actually, do you want to see where I live? I can make sure you get back out without anyone seeing you.” The thought came to her so suddenly it surprised her. Maybe she just wasn’t ready to be alone again so quickly.

“Sure.”

They entered the building and Mike saw El’s head twitch slightly before she pulled him quickly along and up a staircase. There was another staircase on that floor that they ascended and at the end of the hallway next to a stack of paper boxes and old library furniture that had been stowed away and forgotten was a door. El opened it and they went inside.

“I can’t have a lot of lights on and there’s only one electrical outlet but I get by.”

Mike looked around. There was a cot that was low to the floor with a blanket on it and a pillow that looked like it was fluffy years ago but now just a ghost of its former self. There was a wooden chair, most likely an old library chair. One bulb hung from the ceiling. It made Mike sad to think that this was where El slept every night. Her laptop was on the floor and he saw a small rack of clothes.

“What do you think?” She asked him. She knew it must look abysmal.

“El, this makes me so sad. You deserve better than this.”

“Someday I’ll have better. It’s not forever, Mike.” She tried to make him feel better. “Come on, I’ll get you back out of here.”

They left the way they had come and didn’t encounter anyone as El led Mike back outside. She could have just opened the door to let him out but she wanted to say goodbye again. They stepped back

over to the hidden spot in the bushes.

“Be careful walking back home. I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah. El, you are welcome at my place any time. I hope you know that.”

He hugged her again. She buried her face in his chest and inhaled, hoping that his scent would linger on her own clothing. She held on to him. Hugs from Mike were her new favorite thing in the whole world.

“Thanks, Mike.”

She finally relaxed her arms and let them drop back to her sides, knowing that she couldn’t stand there holding on to him forever. She made sure no one was coming up the path.

“Well, goodbye, Mike.”

“Bye, El. I’ll talk to you soon.” He grinned at her before he walked away. When he was gone El let herself back inside and went back to her room.

For the next few weeks every time Mike closed his eyes to go to sleep he couldn’t get the image of El’s tiny cot out of his mind. It pained him that she lived like that when she was such a great person and had already been through so much in her life. They had their lab together and ate their Wednesday lunches but after Halloween they had become closer and she would show up at his place and they’d have dinner or watch a movie or just hang out. He liked having her around.

Thanksgiving was approaching and Mike wanted to go home so he could see his friends. He knew they would all be back in town. He didn’t want to leave El all alone though. He had asked her to come with him and have Thanksgiving with his family but she had declined. She wasn’t ready to go back there yet and didn’t want to be an outsider at his family’s holiday. He had told her that he wanted

her to meet his friends and while El thought that sounded like so much fun, as Mike always talked so highly of them and got so excited when he told her stories about things they had done growing up, she wasn't sure showing up with Mike to a major holiday when they were just friends was really how she wanted to meet everyone. Not that she thought they would ever be anything *more* than friends but she couldn't help thinking of him introducing her, saying something like, *this is my lab partner. I brought her to Thanksgiving.*

It was the Saturday before Thanksgiving and El was having dinner with Mike at his apartment. He had made spaghetti. He was leaving Sunday morning to go back to Hawkins and would be gone until the next Sunday.

"Would you want to stay here over the break? You could have the place all to yourself. I don't want to think of you spending the week alone but I certainly don't want you to be all alone in the attic of the library. It would make me feel like some sort of hero." Mike smiled.

His smile always made her heart beat faster. She had noticed it and started keeping track and was certain now that every time he smiled at her she felt a little fuzzy.

"You'd *want* me to stay here?"

"Yeah! You can come and go as you please. You can use all of my hot water. You can eat my food. I'd be happier if I knew you were here."

El thought about it. It definitely would be nice to have a bed to sleep in, for an entire week, and to be able to leave whenever she wanted without having to sneak around under the cover of darkness.

"That would be pretty great." Her smile went up to her eyes.

"Well why don't you get whatever you'd want for the next week and then come back over here tonight. We can watch movies and then when I leave in the morning I'll leave you my key. Not that you need a key but that way it's official. If anyone asks, you have a key to the place."

Since it was already evening Mike walked El back and waited on her while she got her computer and a bag of personal things she needed for the week. She actually had so little that she could have taken all of her belongings in two bags but she just brought the one, just bringing some clothes and her toothbrush.

They watched a couple of movies but El didn't want Mike to stay up really late because he was driving back to Hawkins in the morning. She also refused when he tried to get her to take his bed, arguing that she could sleep in it the next few nights and that she'd be happier knowing that he was well rested before his drive home. They both put on their pajamas and brushed their teeth, sharing the sink in the bathroom. El thought she had never been in such an intimate situation, brushing her teeth standing next to him, both looking into the mirror at the other. They had toothpaste foam on their mouths and bent to spit at the same time, knocking their heads together gently. They both laughed and Mike gestured for her to go first.

El got comfortable on the sofa as Mike set the bags that he would take home with him next to the front door. He was walking around making sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Finally satisfied that he had everything he needed, he said goodnight to El.

"I hope you sleep well." He walked over to the sofa and pulled the blanket up around her, tucking her in and causing a smile to overtake her face. "I'll see you in the morning."

Before he left the next morning Mike hugged her again. She wouldn't say that she was used to it but she definitely would say that she greatly enjoyed it. She started to crave the physical contact.

"Seriously, make yourself at home. Anything in here is fair game for you to use, eat, or wear. I'll be back Sunday."

"Be safe. Have a good Thanksgiving." El smiled as Mike picked up his bags.

"I wish you would come with me but I guess you being here is the

next best thing. Maybe some other time you'll feel ready."

"Yeah, maybe."

Mike looked at her. There was something he wanted to do but he stopped himself. "Well, I'll see you later."

El watched him go down the stairs and watched as he loaded his bags into his car. He waved to her and she waved back before he drove away and she went inside.

She actually loved living in a real apartment and sleeping in a real bed and having a real bathroom and shower but she missed Mike. She had gotten used to being around him and now that he wasn't there she really felt how empty her life was. It was Monday evening. She was on her laptop in the living room, feeling like a normal person, when she got an email from Mike.

*Hey El,*

*The guys all think you should have come. I didn't tell them about the real you, just that you're a cool girl I really like hanging out with. They all agreed that you shouldn't be alone on Thanksgiving. We've been playing D&D in my parents' basement. I hope you are eating. Here's a secret, I knew I was going to ask you to stay at my place so on Friday I had bought stuff I thought you'd like in case you said yes. I hope you found it.*

*I hope you're sleeping in the bed and not on the couch. And I hope you're having a nice week. I'm having fun but I kind of want to be back home. It's nice seeing the guys though.*

*I'll see you in a few days.*

*Mike*

She wrote him back and assured him that she was sleeping in his bed. She had found the yogurt and Eggos he'd bought along with everything she could possibly need to make sandwiches, with fancy bread that she'd never let herself buy and real cheese, not processed

cheese. He had bought milk and eggs and chips and soda and El had more food than she thought she could ever want. She had opened the bread box and found an envelope inside with her name on it. She opened it and found a twenty dollar bill and a note from Mike insisting that she use the money to get herself some Chinese food or something else she liked for Thanksgiving, that he was sorry he couldn't provide turkey and stuffing but that he didn't want her to eat a sad tv dinner for her holiday meal. El was touched.

She told him she thought she might miss him but said it in a joking manner, not yet ready to let him know how much she *really did* miss him.

The week progressed, El felt at home in Mike's apartment and had done as he'd asked and bought herself dinner on Thanksgiving Day. There were plenty of open restaurants in the area so she ordered a grilled chicken salad and had it delivered, surprised at how big it turned out to be. She watched *X-Men: Days of Future Past* while she ate her really big salad. She had watched all of the X-Men movies Mike had in his collection that week, starting to understand them and feeling connected to the mutants. It made her feel less alone, even if they were only fictional characters.

On Friday night El was sitting in Mike's bed writing in her journal. She was jotting down every thought that came into her head about her friendship with Mike, how he made her feel, how nice he was and how she trusted him. She heard what sounded like someone or something in the kitchen. She heard the refrigerator open and close. Immediately her senses were up and she crept into the hallway, ready to fight any intruder.

She slowly rounded the corner and could see into the kitchen. Mike was putting containers of food into the refrigerator. El felt herself sigh in relief that she wouldn't have to thwart any foes.

"Mike. I thought you weren't coming back until Sunday. Is something wrong?"

Mike looked at her. She was dressed in flannel pajama pants and one of his sweatshirts. He recognized it. It also hung almost comically to

her knees. Her hair was pulled back into a haphazard ponytail and she was wearing glasses, which he hadn't known she wore.

"I wanted to come back early." He said as he started to cross the room, getting closer to her. "I, um, I kind of missed you," he said as he stepped in front of her.

El looked up at him. He was staring so intently at her, his eyes dark.

"Yeah, I think I know what you mean." Without realizing it she had put her hands on his shirt, just under his ribs.

Mike started to lean in and El instinctively stood higher on her toes. She closed her eyes as he got closer.

*I think he's going to kiss me! I hope he's going to kiss me.*

She felt his lips brush against hers softly. It was a quick kiss but it took her breath away a bit. She looked at him and smiled, he was still very close to her. His hand moved to her neck and then she felt his fingers on the back of her head and he kissed her again. The second kiss was longer and deeper and made El forget where she was. It was as though her lips knew what to do and felt like they had practiced it for years. If she had thought hugs from Mike were her favorite thing she had a new contender for the title.

"I've wanted to do that for a while now. I hope it's okay." Mike still had his hand on her head but had pulled away enough to speak. El had his shirt bunched into her fists.

"Um, that was, wow. It's definitely okay, Mike."

"Can I do it again?"

El nodded. "Uh huh."

Mike smiled.

**Notes for the Chapter:**



Where will we go from here? I have my ideas..

I thought about detailing Mike's trip back home for Thanksgiving but I decided that this is a story about Mike and El and I don't want to include the whole party. I want to focus on this relationship and just mention the others occasionally. They may show up at a later date because obviously I'm going to make El return to Hawkins at some point. You know, go to town, burn it down, turn around, and get your stroll on, baby. But figuratively.

## 4. Chapter 4

El had always assumed that her first kiss, *if* there ever was a first kiss, would be awkward and fast. Her reality was much more pleasant. They stood in Mike's kitchen kissing, El couldn't say for how long. She had lost all sense of time. The feel of his hands on her head, fingers gently running through her hair, sent a tingling sensation down her spine.

When they finally stopped they grinned at each other. El was a little surprised that she didn't feel at all awkward now that it was over. She felt relaxed and Mike seemed to as well. There was something about him that always put her at ease.

"Your glasses are cute. I didn't know you wore glasses." Mike tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. It had escaped her ponytail.

"I usually just wear them at night. Are you making fun of me?" She asked good-naturedly.

"Definitely not. I'm serious. I think they're kind of sexy."

El blushed. She looked away from him but when she looked back he was still smiling at her, causing her heart to do that thing again.

"I was going to bed soon but I can move out to the sofa. I don't mind."

"No, you can sleep in the bed. I'll be fine." Mike shook his head.

El thought for a minute. "Well, your bed is big enough. What if we shared it?"

"Really? That sounds good to me." Mike's voiced almost cracked, his throat had gotten so dry with her question.

Mike had to put a few things away from his trip, had to finish putting away the food his mother had sent back. El had padded down the hall back to his room. When he got there she was sitting up in bed

writing in her journal but she had taken off the sweatshirt, revealing the white tank top she was wearing underneath it. Mike thought she looked more at home in his bed than he ever had.

“I’m gonna put on my pajamas.” He took some pants out of his dresser.

“Want me to leave?” El asked.

“No. I’m nothing to write home about. My boxers aren’t going to reveal anything.” He winked at her but El still felt her cheeks get warmer. He let his jeans drop to the floor and was in the pajama pants before El knew it. He changed from the long sleeved shirt he had been wearing to a t-shirt. El could make out the definition of his muscles on his thin frame.

He climbed into his side of the bed. El finished writing and set the journal on Mike’s bedside table along with her glasses. She turned off the lamp and got comfortable. She was lying on her side, facing Mike, and he was facing her.

“I’ve never slept in the same bed as anyone before.” El moved her hand underneath her head. “You’ve caused me to do a lot of things for the first time.”

“Like what?” Mike moved a tiny bit closer to her.

“Like I’ve never told anyone about my life in the lab, that’s a first. You were the first person who ever sang to me and the first person I ever went to a restaurant and had dinner with. I had never watched movies or eaten pizza with someone at their house, that’s another first. You were the first person who ever hugged me. And you were the first person to ever kiss me.” Her voice got more quiet as she said that. She was looking into Mike’s eyes. “And now you’re the first person I’m ever going to sleep next to in the same bed.”

“I’m happy you’re here, El. Could you, um, could you scoot a little closer?”

El moved forward, getting closer to him. He pulled her the rest of

the way until his arms could wrap around her.

“This okay?”

El nodded. If she was being honest with herself she had been hoping he would want to cuddle or snuggle or whatever it was but had been afraid to ask. She didn't feel pressured in any way, just comfortable and content. Her face was on his neck, her arm around his waist.

“And you're my first friend. That's the best thing.”

El spent the remainder of the weekend with Mike. They played video games where Mike always won. She wouldn't allow herself to cheat even though she knew she could. On Saturday night she slept with him in his bed again but like the night before, they just cuddled and then slept. She woke up Sunday with him spooning her from behind and let herself fall back to sleep, wanting it to last as long as possible.

Mike made waffles and eggs and bacon on Sunday morning and El was reminded that she had never had anyone cook for her, other than people who worked in restaurants that she had eaten in over the years, usually fast food type places where a kid wouldn't draw much attention.

Mike heard El sigh as she looked at her plate filled with food.

“What is it?”

“This is nice. I was just thinking about how I never get this. Sunday morning breakfasts, lounging on the couch watching television, it's just *nice*.”

It was on the tip of Mike's tongue to tell her that she could have that every weekend, that she could live in his extra room and never feel alone again, but he didn't think she was ready yet. He didn't want to ask and be turned down.

“You can always have breakfast with me, El.” He thought that was a good cover for what he'd really wanted to say.

As the day drew on it got closer to time for El to return to her real life of living in the library attic. She had class the next morning and her books were all there and even though she had been dreading going back there, she knew she had to.

Mike walked her to the library. It was dark but not that late, the late autumn sun setting early. They stopped in her spot in the bushes to say goodbye.

"Please don't just sit around in here, come to my place. You can let yourself in if I'm not there. I hate to think of you sitting all alone in that little room with barely any light."

"Okay, Mike. I'll come over when I'm lonely."

She put her arms around his waist and hugged him. He returned the hug but after a minute he shifted so that she would look at him. El, thinking something was wrong when he moved his arms, looked up at him with concern and that's when his lips met hers and it felt like her first kiss all over again. He put his hand on her cheek and they both slanted their heads slightly. El felt weak in the knees.

"Be careful going inside. If I don't see you tomorrow I'll see you Tuesday at lab."

"M'kay." El nodded and Mike kissed her one more time before walking back the way he came.

El went upstairs and sat on her cot. Having a taste of what a real life was like might be worse than never having one at all. She had felt happy when she was with Mike.

El was dreaming of the past. She was in a tank of water, surrounded by darkness, and she was scared. She could feel the water on her arms, it was so real. She hadn't had a nightmare like this in a while but for the few previous nights since coming back from Mike's she had started to be plagued by bad dreams again.

Outside thunder rumbled loudly. The winds whipped around the

building and the rains, which had started an hour or so before, got heavier. The weight of the water on the roof of the library caused some old shingles to wash away and the water started to drip into the building. It was at first a slow trickle but then became a small stream, landing on El's arm while she slept on her cot.

She finally alerted, sitting up and realizing that the water from her dream was in fact *real* water and it was falling from the ceiling. Her floor was already wet. She quickly threw on her shoes and stuffed as many clothes as she could into her duffle bag. She was glad she had left her laptop sitting in the chair before she went to bed or it would now be saturated. She put it in her backpack with all of her textbooks, her journals, and her glasses. She grabbed her coat, which felt damp, and shoved her arms into the sleeves. Looking around the room, she thought she had everything of value to her. She opened the door to the hallway and was surprised to find water there as well. It was close to 3:00 in the morning and she could hear the storm outside but she knew that with the damage that had already been caused by the leak she would not be able to stay there any longer. They would have to repair the damage and she would most definitely be found.

When she got outside, having noticed water damage had made its way as far down as the second floor, the cold was numbing. She didn't have an umbrella and she was soaked before she even got to the street in front of the library. She trudged on, knowing that there was only one place she knew to go at such a late hour where she would feel safe and warm.

She was crossing a street next to a bus stop. The rain was filling the gutters and rushing like small rapids through any litter that had accumulated there. The covered bus stop was just ahead of her and she thought she would catch her breath there. She stepped inside, noting that luckily the wind was blowing from behind the covered area and the rain wasn't pelting her anymore. She had only been standing there for a few seconds when another person entered. Instead of keeping to himself he stood right next to her, looming over her. His gray beard was dripping with rainwater and his eyes looked wild.

“What are you doing here at this time of night, baby?” El felt disgusted at his pet name and even more disgusted that he was reaching out to put his hand on her. He pushed her against the wall of the bus stop and stood in front of her.

“Little girls shouldn’t be out alone. I’ll take care of you.” He was about to touch her cheek.

El couldn’t stand it. She focused on him and knew that he noticed the look in her eyes. He couldn’t see for long though because next the lights in the bus stop exploded and the man was hurled across the length of it, smashing into the opposite wall so hard that it left a dent and the roof of the bus stop slanted.

El didn’t wait to see anything else. She hurried in the direction of Mike’s apartment. She felt like crying.

She was so cold when she got to Mike’s that her fingers felt like they would break if she tried to make a fist. She knocked on the door as best she could, but he was probably asleep and might not even hear her. The thought of having to remain outside in the cold was something she pushed to the back of her mind. She knocked again.

Finally she heard the locks turning and the door opened just slightly. She could see Mike’s dark mop of hair sticking every which way. He was rubbing his eyes.

“El? What’s wrong?” He opened the door so that she could come inside. He noticed immediately how cold she was. Her teeth were chattering and her lips were almost blue and she was shivering uncontrollably.

“There was a l-leak in the r-r-roof and everything is wet. I di-didn’t know where else to g-go. I’m s-s-sorry.”

Mike barely heard her. He had taken her bags, pulling her backpack from her back, and was removing her coat. Her clothes were totally wet. He pulled her to the sofa and sat her down so he could remove her wet shoes. He pulled a blanket around her shoulders and then went to find her some clothes to wear. It was clear that her bag was

waterlogged.

He grabbed the first sweatshirt he could find and a t-shirt for her to wear underneath it. His sweatpants would be too big but they would have to do.

“Go take a hot shower and try to warm up. You can wear these. I’ll take care of the wet stuff.” Mike didn’t wait for her to answer. He took her duffle bag and went to the little alcove in his kitchen where his small washer and dryer were stored and started a load of her laundry. It made him sad when he looked into the washing machine and her entire wardrobe didn’t take up half of it. When he got back to the living room she was still on the sofa.

“Come on, El.” He took her hand. She seemed to be a little bit in shock. He led her down the hall to the bathroom. “Just warm up. You can put these on when you feel better.” He set the clothes he’d found for her on the sink. She nodded but continued to stand still. Mike started the water and made sure it was a nice warm temperature. He stood right in front of her so he knew she was seeing him. “You have to get in. You’ll feel so much better. I’ll make you some tea, or cocoa? Which would you prefer.”

“Tea? Tea.”

“Okay. Are you going to get in the shower?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’m going into the kitchen now.”

To try to bring her back to herself he kissed her forehead before he left the room. El sighed and removed her wet clothes. She stepped into the hot shower and immediately started to feel better, just like Mike had said.

By the time she appeared again, looking warmer but sad and worried, Mike had made tea and her clothes were already in the dryer. She glanced at the clock in the kitchen, it was a little after 5:00.



"I don't know how I can make it to class today. I feel so drained. I don't know where I'm going to live, Mike."

Mike just held her as she started to cry.

"At least you're safe. You don't have to go to class, you can stay here. Want me to stay here today with you? I will. I don't have much today." He was rubbing her back and she was starting to feel the tiniest bit less worried. "Let's go sit on the sofa and drink our tea. It's more comfortable."

He held her hand as they went into the living room and it didn't go unnoticed by El.

Mike could see that now that she was warmer and felt safe the events of the night were catching up to her, the adrenaline was gone and exhaustion was setting in.

"Um, you can say no, but if you want to come sleep with me you can."

El thought nothing sounded better than to sleep next to Mike and have him keep her warm. She was so tired now.

"Okay. I'm so sleepy."

"I know. You had a rough night. It's over now though. We can just hang out tomorrow and figure out what you're going to do. I'll help you."

She smiled shyly at him. Mike always loved the different little smiles she had. Her face was so full of expression.

Once they were in Mike's bed El snuggled against him. She could feel sleep already starting to overtake her.

"I'm glad you came here when you didn't know where else to go. I'm glad you thought of me." Mike held her against his side, letting her head rest halfway on his chest.

“You’re my best friend, Mike.”

Mike was awake for a while, holding El and listening to her breathe. His brain was coming up with ideas of what he could do to help her. He knew what he *wanted* to do to help and he was thinking that maybe it wouldn’t be so wrong to ask. She had nowhere to go and no one knew her predicament but him. It was the best solution he could come up with. He vowed to himself that he would discuss it with her when she was awake and was feeling better. He told himself that he was holding her so tightly because he was trying to keep her warm but he knew he was lying to himself. He knew that he felt more whole when she was in his arms.

When El woke up Mike was asleep, his arms still wrapped around her. She watched him and felt something bubbling in her chest. *Happiness?* He opened his eyes not long after but didn’t seem surprised that she was looking at him.

“Do you feel better now? Warmer?” Mike asked. The rain had stopped and sun was filtering through his blinds, landing on his face. His hair was in his eyes.

El pushed the hair away so that she could see him better.

“I feel a lot better now.” She got quiet and looked away from him. Mike noticed her facial expression had suddenly changed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mike, on the way over here last night, or this morning or whenever it was, a man tried to, well I don’t really know *what* his plan was but I knew I wasn’t safe and I kind of made him fly across the bus stop vestibule and crash into the other side. I messed the entire bus stop up. Then I ran here. It made me feel gross and I can still see him standing in front of me. He was trying to put his hand on my cheek.”

Mike thought that explained how shocked she seemed to be the night before better than just being cold and wet. He sat up and pulled her into him.

“He didn’t get you though. You made it here and now everything is okay.”

“Well, not *everything*. I still don’t have anywhere to live.”

Mike held her head close to him, she didn’t seem grossed out when *he* put his hand on her cheek.

“El, what if, um, what if you moved into my extra room? I don’t use it and I like you being here and you need a place to stay. It would be perfect.”

El didn’t answer him but she moved her arms so that she was hugging him, he felt her sigh into his chest, he felt her relax.

“I don’t know if I’ll be a very good roommate. I’ve--”

“*Never lived with anyone before*. I know.” Mike finished her sentence. She stared at him, her jaw slack, before they both burst into laughter.

There wasn’t a bed in Mike’s extra room but they made it work until they could procure some furniture for El. She hadn’t planned on sleeping in Mike’s bed with him every night but until she had her own bed he said that’s how he wanted it. It took a little over a week to scout out some used furniture stores and find what they wanted but they finally were happy with their choices and the store would deliver so El knew that in two more days she would have her own room with her own furniture at Mike’s place. *Their* place.

The night after they had bought the furniture and knew that in just a couple of days El could sleep by herself, they found themselves not just cuddling. The heat between them was getting stronger and they were both finding it more and more difficult to control themselves. They made out for hours, but never removed their clothes. Mike was trying his hardest to remind himself that this was all still new to her and he didn’t want to make her regret anything.

"I think it might be good that you'll have your own bed soon." Mike was almost breathless, kissing El was making him a little crazy.

"You don't want me in here?" She asked. She was nibbling on his ear lobe and *how does she know to do that?*

"I definitely want you in here. Maybe a little too much, you know?"

"Oh. Yeah. I know," she said quietly. She knew exactly what he meant because she knew she felt the same way but didn't think she was quite ready to take the next step, not ready in her mind anyway.

Once the furniture was delivered El was quite happy in her new room. Mike had found some old Star Wars sheets of his to put on her bed and he gave her a teddy bear to set on top of it. She even had a fuzzy rug and a mirror. It was more than she'd ever had in her life.

They finished out the semester, both of them getting all A's in their classes. Christmas break was coming and practically everyone on campus would be gone for the almost three week long hiatus.

"What do you want for Christmas, El?" Mike asked as they were sitting in her room just talking. She liked hanging out in there, liked having her own place.

"I don't need anything. You've done so much for me already. But I would definitely like to get *you* something. What would you like for Christmas, Mike?"

Mike thought about it for a bit but he knew his answer. He was just worried that he would put her on the spot.

"I want you to come home with me to Hawkins for the break. I want you to meet my friends and family."

He had braced himself for the distinct possibility that she would quickly refuse but it looked like she might be mulling it over.

“Okay. If that’s what you want. I know if I feel weird about it you’ll make me feel better.”

Mike was caught off guard by her remark. “Well, yeah. Totally.”

“Where would I sleep?” The thought occurred to her that it would be yet another first, the first time that she ever stayed at someone’s parents’ house and would be considered a guest.

“Well, I’m sure we can both just sleep in the basement. That’s where I spent most of my time when I lived at home. My mom will be okay with it. My mom is gonna *love* you.”

“Why would you think that?” El looked at him questioningly.

“El, come on. You are awesome.” He moved to sit next to her on the bed. “You’re super smart, your voice sounds like music, your smile brightens any room, you’re amazingly sweet, and you’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever known. What’s not to love?”

El knew he didn’t mean it the way it sounded but hearing the word *love* used in the same sentence as her name made her feel emotions she had never felt. Her lower lip started to tremble and the more she tried to make it stop the more it trembled.

“Hey, don’t cry.” He pulled her closer to him. She tried to stop but she had to let herself cry into his shoulder for a few minutes. He was giving her all the things she thought she’d never have and he was doing it like it was no big deal but to El it was a *very* big deal and it made her so happy sometimes that all she could do was cry.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I get like this.” El sniffed and tried to get herself under control.

“It’s okay. I kind of get an ego boost out of comforting a superhero.”

She punched him playfully but then rested her head back against his chest.

They packed their things the night before they were to go back to Hawkins. Mike had gone out to get them some food and when he came back there were no parking places so he had to park on the street. It had been snowing all day, the snow starting a few days earlier but Chicago was always prepared for such an occurrence.

Early the next morning Mike was awakened by a loud sound that he recognized immediately.

“Shit!”

He swore so loudly that El heard him from her room and came out to see what the problem was. He saw her and explained.

“The plow just went by. I heard it. My car is on the street and it’s going to be covered in snow and we won’t be able to go home.” He was frantic.

El stopped him from pacing around. She made him look at her.

“Mike, it’s okay. I can take care of it.”

“You can? How?” It occurred to Mike then that he had never seen her use her powers except for that night that the lights went out and the tv turned on.

“Just get ready like normal. It’s going to be fine. I promise.” She stood up on her toes and kissed him and he could feel her energy. He knew she would fix everything.

There was no one out on the street when they were ready to leave. Mike watched as El looked at his car, which was covered in snow. She looked determined and focused and kind of *mad* all at once. Her head flicked to the right Mike heard the snow sigh and rumble softly. Then the snow covering the hood of his car began to grumble, rising off the metal and forming a ball in the air before flying swiftly into an alley near where Mike had parked. Then her head flicked the other way and the snow in the back did the same thing. Mike could see the tiny crystals bunching together, could hear the ice scraping

the car. Finally she lifted her right hand and the snow around the tires and door, packed in and dirty, started to actually dissipate. There was a heaving sound and something like the sound of suction releasing. Mike could see some of the snow evaporating to steam while some larger chunks joined the other snow in the alley. Mike's jaw felt like it was on the sidewalk. When she was finished she turned to him. She looked hopeful, like a kid who wanted to please their teacher.

"You are so awesome." Mike hugged her so hard her feet came off the ground. When he set her back down she was smiling so brightly at him that he had to kiss her.

"That was amazing. I always believed you but seeing it is something entirely different."

They loaded into Mike's car and started their journey.

Mike reached over and squeezed El's hand, giving her a reassuring smile.

"Hawkins, we're coming home."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So they're goin' back to Hawkins (to Hawkins, to Hawkins...). I know I just said that the others would only be mentioned but it looks like they'll turn up for Christmas and El can meet them all. Since El lives with Mike now, I wonder how that tension will finally play out. And if I haven't been clear this is an AU that is set in more modern times so it's before now but not much before. Definitely uses the technology we have now. As always thanks for reading and if you want to review I appreciate that but no worries if not. I write for me.

## 5. Chapter 5

The whole way back to Hawkins Mike tried to make El feel comfortable. He could tell that she was nervous. She had been fine while they were still in Illinois but once they crossed over into Indiana he noticed that she began to fidget more. He talked to her about what his family did for Christmas traditions, how his mother always made way too much food, how his father would probably sleep through most of the holiday but would somehow always know when it was time to eat. As they pulled into the outskirts of town she bit her lower lip, looking out the window at the place she had run away from almost ten years ago.

“Are you afraid?” Mike asked. They were driving past the old Sattler quarry.

“A little. I’m glad you’re here.”

Mike took her hand again. “Do you want to see something cool?”

She looked puzzled but nodded and Mike turned onto a little dirt road. He drove a short distance and then stopped.

“We have to walk from here.”

They got out and Mike gave El the striped beanie he found in the pocket of his coat, placing it on her head and tugging it down. Her hair stuck out from underneath it in a way that Mike thought might be one of the most adorable sights he’d witnessed. He took her hand and they walked into the forest. The snow wasn’t too deep and El could hear snow birds chirping. The serene surroundings made her feel more peaceful, the gently blowing wind causing the bare trees to sway. It didn’t take long for them to emerge from the woods and Mike led El to a grouping of rocks. When they stepped onto them she could see that they were standing on the edge of a cliff. Below them was the quarry, the crater filled with water. It looked to El like it was frozen in places because some parts of it were shinier.

“We’re so high up!” El had never seen anything like it.



“We used to come here a lot to play. I liked to come here and sit on these rocks, looking down at the water, and think. I’d sometimes wonder what would happen if I jumped off.”

She looked at him sternly. “Why would you do that?”

Mike shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I just always wished I had someone to really understand me. My friends are great, but I don’t think they really get the way I think.”

“I know what you mean. Not about my friends not understanding me, because I didn’t have any, but I wished I had someone to understand me too. It was so hard being alone.”

They stood looking out at the water. Mike laced her fingers into his.

“Hey, El? Um, we’re about to go to my parent’s house and it might be a little overwhelming, especially when the guys come over later, well, and Max, so I wanted to ask you while we were alone and before you’re bombarded with questions from my mom.”

“What is it? And what should I say when they ask me things?”

“You can just say what you’ve said until now. I’m not going to tell anyone your secret. As for your last name, it can be a coincidence. And we can call you El from the start. If that’s okay with you.”

“I’d like that a lot.” She smiled up at him, her expression relaxing and looking less anxious.

“That, uh, that wasn’t what I was going to ask you though.” Mike ran his free hand through his hair. “What if we were more than friends? Like, what if it wasn’t weird if I kissed you when we were around other people and I could hug you or hold your hand or whatever without needing to explain myself to anyone. You could be my girlfriend? I know it might be weird because we live together now and--”

“Mike.” She turned to face him. The breeze was blowing and the

little wisps of hair that stuck out from underneath the beanie were dancing around her face. “Whatever you want to call it, I’d very much like it if you could kiss me or hug me or hold my hand without anyone making you feel strange about it. If that’s what we need to call it then I would like to be your girlfriend.”

They stood on the cliff getting lost in each other’s eyes until Mike broke the stare and leaned down to kiss her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed into him.

“I guess not everything that happens here is bad,” El whispered as their heads shifted.

They stood on the rock with their foreheads touching, just listening to the sounds of the forest.

“This may be the first time I’ve ever come here and not walked away feeling like my wishes would never come true,” Mike said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Mike, I understand.”

El followed Mike’s lead when they got to his parents’ house. She was definitely nervous to meet them and knew that her showing up with him would be a surprise. She was a little afraid his mother wouldn’t like her or that she wouldn’t be welcomed.

She needn’t have worried though. When they walked through the front door she was hit with the delicious smells of dinner cooking and before she even had a chance to look around the entryway Mike’s mother was walking out of the kitchen to greet them, wiping her hands on her apron. She smiled warmly at El before she kissed her son on his cheek.

“You’re home!” Mike’s mother hugged him and El stood to the side, watching.

“Mom, I brought a guest. This is El. She’s my girlfriend.” Mike’s eyes met El’s and they both smiled like fools.

“Well hello, El! It’s nice to meet you. If Mike thinks highly enough of you to bring you home then you must be special.” She was coming closer to El as she spoke, her arms outstretched. She hugged El the same way that she had hugged Mike just a minute earlier and El thought she might break down into tears.

“Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler.” Her voice was soft, still reeling from the hug from Mike’s mother.

“Oh, please. Call me Karen! Dinner will be ready soon. Why don’t you kids put your bags away? Mike, are you sleeping in the basement?”

“I kind of need to talk to your about that, mom. I’ll show El where to put our stuff and I’ll come find you in the kitchen.”

Mike showed El the basement, explaining that she could look around it while he talked to his mother. He dashed back up the stairs, leaving her to admire the posters and the remnants of his childhood. She looked at the old toys on the shelves and the worn table in the middle of the room.

Mike entered the kitchen where his mother was chopping vegetables to go into the salad.

“What did you need to talk about, sweetie?”

“I wanted to talk to you about El. Would it be okay if we *both* sleep in the basement? It would be in separate places. She’s a little afraid to be here. She’s had a really rough life, Mom, and I want to make her feel comfortable.”

Mike didn’t know that El had come up the stairs, not realizing that there was a bathroom in the basement. She heard her name and lingered out of sight.

“Couldn’t she sleep in your room and you take the basement?”

El heard Mike sigh. “Okay, well, I have a story for you. El actually is living in my spare room. Don’t worry! We aren’t doing anything for

you to worry about. I met her in chem lab and we became friends but then I found out that she had to live somewhere sad and awful and it broke my heart. I let her stay at my place when I came home for Thanksgiving.”

“So *that’s* why you went back early?”

“Yeah, but the thing is that she fits there like she was always supposed to be there. She fits with *me* like she was always supposed to be with me. Anyway, she’s the sweetest person ever and she is like, the smartest person too, smarter than me for sure, and it made me feel good to be able to help her. I wanted her to meet my family and my friends because she’s really important to me.”

El put her hand over her mouth to try to stifle a gasp. She already had tears in her eyes.

“So if we could both sleep down there I think she’d be more comfortable. I want her to have a nice Christmas. I’m pretty sure she’s never had one.” His voice dropped and he sounded so sad.

Karen Wheeler looked at her son, how his eyes were moist and his expression earnest. She knew he was telling her the truth and her heart went out to the girl she’d just met, the sweet girl who made her son smile in a way she had never seen.

“I think she’s lovely, Mike. You can put the air mattresses both down there and that’s where you can stay while you’re here. Did you get her a Christmas present?”

Upon hearing the question El knew she couldn’t eavesdrop any longer. She emerged from the shadows.

“Um, I was looking for the bathroom?” Her voice was tiny.

“There’s one downstairs but you can go upstairs. Look around if you want. I think you’ll be able to tell which one is my room.” Mike winked at her. It made her feel giddy and she turned and left the kitchen, making her way to the stairs.

El studied the pictures on the walls, smiling at seeing Mike at younger ages. His home was like something from a television show, exactly how she always pictured a real home to be.

She found his room and was running her fingers over one of his science fair trophies when he appeared in the doorway.

“You found it.”

She looked up at him, not having heard him approach. He crossed the room to her and she was instantly in his arms, her face on his chest.

“My mom said it’s okay for us both to sleep in the basement. It’s not a problem.”

She squeezed him tighter. “Your basement feels safe and comfortable. I got a feeling of *deja vu* when I walked into it.”

“Dinner is ready. I came up here to find you. The guys and Max are coming over tomorrow. Lucas doesn’t get in until late tonight and Dustin is driving back right now so we’re just going to hang out later. Tonight you just have me. Well, and Nancy and Holly but Holly will be on the phone all night talking to her friends and Nancy will be out until late I’m sure so yeah, maybe just me.”

“That’s enough for me.”

Dinner was far less awkward than El had feared. She sat beside Mike and enjoyed his mother’s roasted chicken and vegetables, fielding questions about her school career mostly. She wasn’t asked about her childhood, much to her relief. His sister Holly had come downstairs to join them but as soon as she was finished eating she asked if she could be excused to her room to call her friend back.

“So what are your plans for tomorrow?” Karen asked them.

“I think everyone is coming over tomorrow and we’ll probably just hang out or go find something to do. We might show El around the town.” El felt him slip his hand into hers as he mentioned exploring

the town.

“As long as you’re here for Christmas Eve. El, we have a tradition where everyone opens just one of their gifts on Christmas Eve. Does your family have any traditions?” Karen smiled, forgetting what Mike had told her about El having never had a real Christmas.

“Um, no. I don’t have any family. There are no traditions.” She looked down at her plate, wishing she could disappear.

Karen made a face at Mike from across the table, remembering then what Mike had said. Her expression saying *I’m so sorry*.

“Is it cool if we go downstairs now? I’ve been driving all day and I’m tired.” Mike’s eyes pleaded with his mother, who understood.

“Sure, sweetie. El, if you need anything at all just let me know. Make yourself at home.”

“Thanks, Mrs., I mean, Karen.”

When they got back down to the basement Mike could read her face.

“I’m sorry. But hey, you can be part of *our* tradition this year. You might have a gift or two somewhere under the tree.” He grinned mischievously. It made El feel better.

“You might have something too. From me.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything, El. You came here with me, that was supposed to be my gift.”

“I know but I wanted to. It’s nothing much.”

Mike held her against him. She could feel his heart beat against her face and it made her feel braver.

“Mike, I think some time while we’re here I want to go see the lab. Just the outside. I don’t want to be afraid anymore.”

Mike held her tighter, letting his hand rub slow circles on her back.

“If that’s what you want to do then we can do it. I even know where we could go so you can see it really well without being seen. We used to spy on it when we were kids, pretending it was the Death Star and we were the Rebels trying to infiltrate it. I wish we had known it was something that *really* needed to be infiltrated. I wish we could have rescued you.”

“It’s okay, Mike. You finally found me.”

They set up the air mattresses and Mike found sheets and blankets for both of them. He wanted to watch a movie downstairs so he put the mattresses side by side, creating one big bed.

“Technically it’s separate.” He laughed, tossing a pillow at El.

“As long as we don’t get in trouble.”

“El, *you* won’t get in trouble for anything. And we’re 21, my mom isn’t stupid. Not that we’re doing anything but even if we were, we’re old enough. And I can tell she really likes you. She would have stood firm on us not sleeping in the same room if she didn’t.”

They put their pajamas on, Mike showing El the basement bathroom where she could change. The movie was already in the player as she crawled into bed. She pulled the blanket around her, noting how it smelled like Mike’s house, like a fireplace and evergreens mixed with cookies and cinnamon. Mike pulled her beside him and she cuddled into him. He was playing with her hair.

They watched *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* and laughed together. El had never seen the movie and Mike loved watching her react to the jokes. He loved hearing her laugh.

El fell asleep right as the movie credits started to roll. Mike turned off the television and pulled the covers around her, kissing her forehead before snuggling in himself.

They slept late the next morning. They were just stirring when they

heard a commotion outside and then there was a loud knock at the basement door. El was scared.

“Yo, Mike! I know you’re in there. Let us in, buddy!”

Mike could see from the look on El’s face that she was alarmed.

“It’s just Dustin. Don’t worry.” He got up and crossed to the door. When he opened it a curly haired guy walked in with another young man.

“Rise and shine!” Dustin enveloped Mike in a bear hug. He was a bit shorter than Mike but picked him up easily. Both of the new boys had stepped inside and Mike was about to close the door when El realized that eyes were on her.

“Oh, hello.” Dustin bowed to El. “Mike didn’t tell us he brought with him the summer, though thou art more lovely and more temperate.”

“El, this is Dustin. And this is Will.” The other boy stepped forward, rolling his eyes at Dustin. Mike continued, “guys, this is my girlfriend, El.” Mike smiled at her adoringly.

“Nice to meet you, El. Ignore Dustin, he’s our bard and tends to get a little flowery with his language.” Will reached down to where she was still sitting up in the middle of the air mattress and shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you too.”

“Mike, we assumed you’d be up. Lucas and Max will be over in like an hour. She’s making him go last minute gift shopping with her. She is *not* in a good mood. Poor Lucas.” Dustin shook his head.

“He loves it. All he can talk about when we talk on the phone is Max.” Mike chuckled.

“I’m going to go upstairs and see if your mom has anything good to eat.” Dustin was already making his way up the stairs.



"If you give us some time to get ready we can all go get something to eat. I told El we would show her around the town today," Mike called after Dustin.

"Sustenance, Mike. A man needs it. I can still eat if we go out. Will, come on. Let them get dressed. I'm sure Karen has all sorts of Christmas goodies already baked!" Will followed Dustin up the stairs.

El was laughing at their exchange. She already thought she liked these boys. Will seemed quiet and sweet and Dustin was clearly a character. Mike approached where she was sitting and helped her up.

"I like Dustin. How come *you* don't quote Shakespeare to me?"

Mike pulled her into him and stared down at her. "Thy eternal summer shall not fade nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st." His voice was low but the words flowed like they were his own thoughts.

"Oh." El was stunned momentarily.

"I was always more into Byron. She walks in beauty, like the night. Of cloudless climes and starry skies, and all that's best of dark and bright meets in her aspect and her eyes." Mike recited the beginning of the poem and El could only stare into his eyes. "We should get ready now," he whispered. They were standing so close, speaking at his normal volume seemed like it would be too loud.

"Right." El nodded, still very shaken by Mike's ability to quote poetry on demand.

"You can use the bathroom down here and I'll go upstairs. Just come up when you're ready." He noticed that she was still staring at him. He smiled, moved his hands to her cheeks, and gently kissed her. "Go, Dustin will eat all of my mom's baked goods."

Mike left El to get herself ready and went upstairs to do the same.

When El got to the kitchen Mike was standing at the counter with Dustin and Will. He noticed her walk in and moved so that she could slide in right next to him.

“So, El, how did you meet Mike? Or more to the point, how did you end up being Mike’s girlfriend?” Dustin asked.

“Dustin, come on.” Mike whined.

“No, I’m just saying, buddy. El, forgive me for looking at you and thinking you are way out of Mike’s league. No offense, Mike.”

“I’m not though. I’m nothing special.” El was now standing against the counter, Mike wrapped around her back, his arms around her waist.

“Damn, buddy. Nice going there. She doesn’t even know.” Dustin winked at El and she felt Mike kiss her right behind her ear.

“We were lab partners in chemistry,” El explained, not catching on to what Dustin was saying. She reminded herself to ask Mike later.

“Chemistry. Obviously.” Dustin laughed.

“Dustin isn’t trying to be so annoying, El, it’s just how he comes across sometimes.” Will spoke up. “I think what he means is, how did you start hanging out with Mike?”

So El told them about their friendship, leaving out some of the sadder parts, and how they spent Halloween together and then got closer and now were happy together. It was the abridged version but until she knew the boys more and had talked to Mike about everything she didn’t want to open up too much.

They had called Lucas and were informed that he and Max would meet them at the diner to eat. They took Mike’s car and headed over. Mike took the long route so they could point out landmarks along the way. They passed the school and the old arcade, which was now a bookstore. They showed her the theater and the store

where Will's mom worked. They pulled into the diner and saw Lucas and Max waiting for them, just having arrived themselves.

Inside they sat at a large booth and El met Lucas and Max.

"Guys, this is my girlfriend. El, this is Lucas and Max." El smiled politely.

"When did you get a girlfriend, Wheeler? Don't worry, El, this isn't about you, this is about our boy Wheeler finally finding someone he thought was worthy of his time. He's very picky." Max stated.

"I'm not that picky. But she's definitely special." Mike looked at El and she blushed.

"Well, damn. Mike Wheeler called a girl *special*. Stop the presses."

Mike gave Max a dirty look across the table.

"So where are you from, El?" Lucas asked. El felt Mike take her hand under the table.

"Um, actually I'm from here. I moved away when I was young. I never went to school here."

Her admission surprised the table.

"Too bad. You could have been friends with us. Max could have had another girl to talk to. Maybe she wouldn't be so angry now." Dustin said, taking a french fry from a basket.

"Hey! Nowadays if you're not angry then you're just stupid or you don't care." Max rebutted.

"That's weird that you lived here and then you met Mike in Chicago, at a school with an 8% acceptance rate." Lucas pointed out, eyeing the both of them, looking for anything to be off.

"What can I say? It's fate. And big talk about our school's acceptance rate when you had to get a freaking *appointment* to yours.

You just want to throw around those Congressional connections.”

“You laugh but someday *I’ll* be the one they look to for answers. It’s good to have them in my back pocket.”

“They’re like Lucas’ metaphorical wrist rocket,” Will said, surprising everyone with his analogy.

They shot insults and jokes back and forth like it was a bottle rocket fight. El found it refreshing to be in the company of people who clearly loved each other but who were also not afraid to say whatever was on their minds, without the need for censoring.

After they ate they finished showing El around the town. Mike made sure to avoid the lab. They all went back to Mike’s to play some games, deciding to play something different than D&D since Max complained and El didn’t know how to play. They decided on Cards Against Humanity and laughed for hours at their funny combinations of answers. Mike hadn’t known how cleverly *funny* El really was until he laid down his black card that said *If you like Taylor Swift then you’ll LOVE* and El laid down a white card that said *root canals*. And that was after Max had put down a card that said *Maybe she’s born with it* and El had laid down a card reading *resting bitch face*. They were in stitches.

It was late and everyone was yawning so they went back to their own homes. As El crawled into bed after brushing her teeth Mike was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” She asked.

“You. Your answers were great. Is there anything you can’t do?” He had turned toward her and was pulling her closer to him.

“Mike, what did Dustin mean this morning in the kitchen when he said I didn’t even know? What don’t I know?”

Mike was confused for a second and then remembered their conversation in the kitchen.

“He meant you don’t know how pretty you are. Sometimes really pretty girls are kind of snobby, like they think they’re better than other people. He was saying you must not know how truly beautiful you are if you’re with me. He was joking about that part, I hope, but I get what he was saying. You are way too pretty to be with me. I realize that.”

El looked at him and shook her head. “I am not. I don’t care what I look like, I know how you make me feel and I always want to feel that way. I think *you’re* pretty. I like your cheekbones and your freckles and the way you look at me. No one has ever looked at me the way you do.” She yawned and snuggled into Mike’s side. “Your friends are nice. I liked hanging out with them today.”

“We’ll hang out with them as much as we can while we’re here. We can stay and celebrate New Year’s with them.” Mike felt his eyelids getting heavy. “I’m glad you came home with me, El.”

“I am too, Mike.”

On Christmas Eve, the next day, El got to make cookies for the first time. Karen had asked her if she’d like to help and El listened intently and followed her instructions closely. She was so happy when her first batch of cookies came out of the oven and they looked and smelled like real cookies. She had been afraid they’d be sad looking lumps of goo.

“I know what Mike got you for Christmas.” Karen smiled.

“He didn’t need to get me anything. He’s done so much for me. Just being here with him is enough.”

Karen’s heart swelled hearing El talk about her son. She was happy that she had raised such a thoughtful and caring man.

“I’m glad you think so. I know he’s looking forward to giving you his gift. I won’t say any more.” She pretended to zip her lips closed, winking at El.

El had in fact gotten Mike a gift but she was second guessing it now, thinking maybe it wasn't enough or maybe he wouldn't like it. As the day progressed she debated on whether she should give it to him at all.

That night the family had dinner together. Nancy was home and Holly wasn't on the phone and they all sat around the table eating the roast beef that Karen had made. El had never had a Christmas dinner, she had never had a dinner as nice as the one she was currently enjoying. Besides the roast beef there were green beans and potatoes wrapped in bacon that had been roasted as well. There were glazed carrots and broccoli with cheese sauce. There were dinner rolls. El felt so far away from the girl who lived in secret in an attic library. She noticed Mike watching her and smiled at him. He had made it all possible.

After dinner they all went into the living room. Karen had put Christmas music on in the background and they began to each choose a gift from under the tree. El sat back and watched as the family opened their gifts, just happy to be there. Mike looked up from the sweater he had just opened and his eyes caught her looking at him. He reached around the side of the tree and took a package out. Crossing the room to sit next to her on the sofa, he handed her the small box.

"I got you a present. I know tomorrow is technically Christmas but I've always thought Christmas Eve was better. There's still the anticipation, there's still the *chance* that Santa might come. Plus the snow falling outside makes it more magical. Tomorrow morning will be a rush of torn paper and then it's over, so I wanted to give you this tonight."

El looked down at the box. "I got you something too. Do you want me to get it?"

"Sure. We can open them together. Let's go outside so we can watch the snow."

He followed her into the basement and then after putting on their coats they went out the back door. The snow was falling softly and

the Christmas lights Mike's father had somehow found the time between work, naps, and eating to put up made everything look mystical.

"You go first." Mike motioned to El, who was still holding her gift from him. She ripped off the paper and opened the box, revealing a necklace. It was silver and had a tiny E hanging from the chain but the main pendant on the necklace was a chemical molecule she recognized immediately.

"You got me an oxytocin necklace?"

"I hope you like it. I wanted to get something chemistry related and when I found this I thought it was pretty perfect. Is it okay?"

El didn't know what to say. Oxytocin was the chemical responsible for bonding, for *love* in some studies.

"I love it. Would you put it on for me?" She turned around so he could fasten it around her neck.

"Okay, you can open yours."

Mike tore the paper off and took the gift out. It was a silver keychain with a real piece of meteorite on it and a strand of DNA.

"Is this real?" He asked.

"The DNA isn't but the meteorite is."

Mike laughed. "I know the DNA isn't real. El, this is so awesome. This was in *space*! I can't believe this. This is like, the perfect gift for me. Dustin and Lucas are going to be so jealous."

"You really like it?" El was feeling better, seeing his face light up with joy over what she thought was her little gift for him.

"It's the best. *You're* the best."

Mike bent down and kissed her, snow falling onto them as they stood

in the yard under Ted Wheeler's Christmas decor.

When they got too cold they went back inside and Mike told his mother they were going to bed. They made out for a while, careful to not get too carried away, even though every time they did it they both wanted *more* from it. When they were really sleepy they cuddled together. El could feel her new necklace resting against her neck.

"Mike, do you think tomorrow some time would be a good time to go to the lab? I want to get it over with but I don't want to go tonight. Tonight I just want to stay here with you and feel happy. I don't know how I'll feel when I see that place but I don't want to spend the rest of our time here dreading it." Her arm was draped across his midsection, her head on his chest.

"Tomorrow would actually be pretty good. Since it's a holiday there probably won't be as many people working and if we go closer to dark the lights will all be on but we will be hidden. I'll take you tomorrow. Just try not to worry about it. Everything will be okay."

Mike felt her sigh so he held her closer. "I like having you next to me, El." He kissed the top of her head as it rested on his chest.

"I like *being* next to you. Merry Christmas, Mike."

The snow continued to fall as they slept, El feeling the most safe she'd ever felt in the town of Hawkins with Mike's arms wrapped around her, making her feel like she wasn't worthless, like she was wanted and loved and mattered to someone.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

The Hawkins visit will take two chapters. Looks like they're going to the lab next. Can El overcome her fears? Thanks for reading. I'm still not sure exactly how long this story will be but I know it's at least a few more chapters. I hope it's somewhat enjoyable.



## 6. Chapter 6

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Mike was driving through town at dusk, El sitting beside him. She kept fiddling with her glasses, anxious, like her hands needed something to do. He reached over and closed his hand around hers. He could feel that she was trembling slightly.

She sighed shakily. “I need to do it, Mike. I need to see where I spent my childhood. I need to see the place that stole my innocence.”

Her morning had been excellent. She’d celebrated her first ever Christmas with someone, with Mike’s family, and had even been surprised when his mother handed her a gift from both Karen and Ted, though El knew that Karen had been the one to mastermind it. Mike’s mother gave her a box filled with different perfumes, eyeshadow palettes, lip glosses, brushes, mascara, and cleansers from Sephora. El had never had such luxuries. There was another gift from Mike under the tree, which made El feel bad that she hadn’t gotten him something else as well, but once she saw how happy he looked when he gave her the gift she could tell that just watching her open it was gift enough for him. She opened the box and pulled out the tissue paper that was on top. Inside was a leather journal, one of the nicest ones she’d ever seen, and several extra books of filler paper. She noticed it was all lined, just the way she liked her journal paper to be. Mike explained that she could carry it with her, it even had a place for a pen to be stored inside and a leather strap to keep it closed. When she filled it up she could just put a new book into the leather cover. His thoughtfulness had made her chest ache and she pulled him into a kiss right there in the living room. She couldn’t stop herself. In a whispered breath she solemnly swore to him that she wouldn’t lose it.

Then they had all had a lovely breakfast together and as El felt Mike’s hand brush against hers under the table and as she looked at him sitting next to her, his grin a little lovesick and *just for her*, she thought at that moment her life was the most perfect it had ever been.

Now she was on her way to the place that had wanted to use her as a weapon and she was going to be brave and get her closure. *She was.* But she was so scared to see it again, even from the outside.

As Mike drove along he pointed out some things she hadn't seen the day before.

"That's Will's house. These woods here back up to the lab and the other side reaches the quarry. We called this area Mirkwood when we were kids. I guess we still do. It's from *The Hobbit*."

El looked out at the brooding forest, the sun having totally set now. She tried to imagine Mike and his friends playing there as kids.

Mike finally turned off the main road onto a smaller dirt path. He parked his car and looked at El.

"We can walk from here to where we need to go. If you change your mind, you can tell me any time. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do." He looked so sincere, his thumb rubbing circles on the back of her hand. She strengthened her resolve. Mike made her want to be brave.

"I'm going to do it. Please don't let go of my hand."

They worked their way through a small patch of snow and soon were following a single set of train tracks. Mike had a flashlight and they walked slowly. Mike never relaxed his grip on El's hand, making her feel somewhat more confident.

El could see lights up ahead, not directly but she could see the glow of them. They came to a clearing next to the tracks and Mike led her up the slight embankment. From there she could see the entire lab. It looked clinical and cold.

"We can go closer if you want."

El could see how the path went down and if they followed it they would be able to see from ground level and yet still be hidden by

trees.

“Yes.”

They tentatively crept down the hill, making sure to watch for patches of ice on the packed dirt. At the bottom El could see the front gate and was close enough to read the signs. She shrunk back against Mike.

“We’re just looking. You can do this, El.” He gave her a reassuring hug and she steeled herself. She looked up at the building. Her jaw was a little slack as she examined the structure, her eyes wide.

“So many windows. I never knew there were windows. I never got to see through one. I never saw trees until I escaped. It just looks like a building. It could be anything. No one would ever know what they did to me in there.”

It was breaking Mike’s heart to hear her realize that the home of the monster she had feared looked to everyday people like a regular place of business. She was being held prisoner and treated like a piece of lab equipment and people could drive by and never give the place a second thought. She had no one. She had no hope.

“A lot of times the worst monsters look normal, El. That’s how they get you.” Mike put his arm around her.

“They killed my mother, Mike. They would have done the same to me when I wasn’t useful anymore. I didn’t matter to them. They only wanted my mind. They never cared that sometimes it hurt me, like physically hurt me, and it always scared me. They didn’t care about me at all. Why couldn’t I have a family and friends? Why did it have to be *me* who had this happen to them? If I hadn’t escaped where would I be now? Would I even still be alive?”

She was starting to spiral, Mike could see. Her voice was getting faster and higher and tears were dripping down from underneath her glasses. Mike pulled her into him and felt her shiver, sobs starting to wrack her body as she let herself break down in his arms. They stood for a few moments, Mike holding her while she cried for her lost

childhood.

When her sobs started to turn into smaller hiccups Mike released his grip slightly, looking down at her tear soaked face. He gently kissed her cheeks, removing a couple of large teardrops that hadn't yet fallen.

"Follow me. I want to show you something."

They walked back into the woods, away from the building, on the opposite side of the street that passed in front of the lab. The forest surrounded them, the snow on the ground muffling the sounds, the darkness overtaking them. If they hadn't had Mike's flashlight they might not have found what he wanted to show her. Not too far away Mike stopped.

"Um, now I don't know if I really want to show this to you but here we are. If you want to leave we can." Mike shined his light down at the ground, revealing the opening of a culvert pipe.

El remembered. It was her way out. It was what she crawled through to escape. It was her path to freedom. She covered her mouth with her hand. Tears were welling in her eyes. Seeing it now, knowing how far it really went, thinking about how long she'd had to crawl through it, was overwhelming. Mike could tell.

"I've been here so many times in my life. I never thought anything of it. Now it makes me sick to my stomach, that this pipe was the only way you had to get out of there. Thinking about you crawling through that, how scared you must have been, how *cold*, really hurts." Mike reached for her hand again but she pulled away.

She was looking down at the pipe, her face a mixture of sadness and anger. "I wish I could have been a regular kid. I wish I didn't have this thing in my head that they wanted. I want to get rid of it, Mike! But I don't know how. What good is it if it would make them want to do that stuff to me? I'm not special. They only wanted to use me. I wish I could make it go away so that could never be a possibility again." She was crying. "Why do you even like me, Mike? Why

would you want to waste your time on me?"

Hearing her talk about herself that way was hurting Mike even more.

"I'm not wasting my time. You are *worth* my time and so much more. El, knowing you has made me happier than I've ever been. I wouldn't give that up for anything. Whatever you might see in yourself that you think is *bad*, know that I think it's awesome because it's *you*. I like everything about you and I liked it before I knew the real you. I like your smile, I like the way your face scrunches when you're thinking or writing. I like your laugh. I like how you wear your glasses at night thinking they're just functional and how they always make me do a double take because they make you look even cuter than you already are. I like how you're the smartest person I know but also probably the most humble. I like how caring you are. I like how you leave me notes when you have early class telling me to have a good day. You draw the cutest smiley faces. I like how when I hug you I feel more whole."

El heard his words, her lower lip quivering as she listened to him list all the things about her he liked.

"El, listen to me. What they did was *wrong*. *They* are the bad guys. Whatever happened to you to cause you to be how you are isn't your fault. But you *are* special, El. Especially to me."

"I'm going to figure out a way to get rid of it. I'm going to study so hard and I'm going to find a way," she whispered into the night.

"El, look at me." Mike turned her to face him, holding on to her arms. The flashlight fell to the ground between them causing the light to cast shadows on their faces. "You don't need to change *anything* about yourself. Do you understand? You are so *amazing* just the way you are. What if you *did* find a way? What if it changed your personality? I couldn't handle that. I can't lose you." His voice was trembling.

El could see his eyes even though the light was coming from the ground. She could see the tears there. Even if she hadn't been able

to see him she could hear the desperation in his voice. His hands were shaking. She could feel the vibrations on her arms.

“You won’t lose me.” She drew closer to him and let her hand rest on his face where she could wipe away a tear. She raised herself up as he lowered his head, meeting in a kiss. Both of them were crying; Mike for El’s sadness about her stolen childhood, El for finding someone who cared for her so much.

They walked back the way they had come, back to Mike’s car. At the top of the hill El took another look back at the lab. It was on the edge of town without much around it. The wind bellowed.

El glared down at the stoic walls. “You don’t win! I win! Do you hear me? I win!” She screamed at the building that to her would always be a prison, though she couldn’t be heard above the sounds of the wind. She started crying again. “You can’t hurt me anymore.” Her voice had shrunk as she fell to her knees, new grief washing over her.

Mike was beside her in an instant, also on his knees, holding her as she wept.

“You’re right. They can’t hurt you anymore, El. *They won’t*. I promise.” He was crying too, his tears mingling with hers as she held on to him as though she might fall through the earth if she let go.

They sat like that until their cries were only sniffles. Mike would have sat there all night if it had been what El needed. She finally complained of being cold so they went back to his car.

The drive back to Mike’s was silent. El was lost in thought, memories surfacing of being in the lab, thoughts she had pushed away years prior. Mike asked her once if she was okay and she only nodded and took his hand. She squeezed it and went back to looking out the window. She never let go once she squeezed his hand.

When they got back to Mike’s, El went to the basement. It was still a little early and Mike’s mother wanted to know if they wanted any dessert, both having declined after dinner earlier. Mike didn’t want

to have to answer any questions so he agreed to a piece of pie. Noticing that El had never come back up from the basement, he went down to check on her.

She was lying in the fetal position in the middle of the air mattress. Mike didn't say anything. He scooted next to her and held her tightly, just letting her know that he was there. He could hear her crying softly, quite differently from the way she'd cried in the forest.

"I've *killed* people, Mike," she whispered. "They might have been bad but I ended their lives. I made it so that they never had the *chance* to be good."

Mike's chin was resting on her shoulder, his mouth right next to her ear.

"They *did* have the chance to be good, El. They made their choice. You were just a kid. You were scared and they wanted to keep you there and scare you even more. You aren't bad. You had to take care of yourself. It's instinct. It's ingrained in us all to try to stay alive. Do you think that if you hadn't killed them you'd be alive now? Everyone running around panicked about whatever happened that night and you, their little secret weapon, escaping and running into guards with guns? Do you think they would have just said, *come on, Eleven, let's go back to your cell*, like it was no big deal? I think they would have shot you. Maybe they would have paralyzed you so that all you could do was their bidding and would never even have the chance again to escape them."

"I never thought of it that way." El took his hand. "I just still feel so worthless."

"I don't think you're worthless. You're worth so much to me. Would you like it better if I found a different person to be my girlfriend?"

"No. I would hate it."

"And you like me, right? You think I'm worth having someone that I really care about, right? Someone who makes me feel happy?"

El squeezed his hand tighter. "Yes."

"So some part of you must think you have enough worth to be my girlfriend." He kissed her neck.

She rolled over then and Mike saw the tears in her eyes but she was smiling at him. Her arms went around his neck.

"You are the best person I'll ever know, Mike Wheeler."

That night Mike woke up to get a drink of water and El wasn't beside him. He checked the bathroom but she wasn't there either. He started to worry. He was about to go check upstairs when he noticed that the back door was the slightest bit ajar. Feeling the cold, he wrapped a blanket around his shoulders before he opened the door.

El was sitting on the concrete pad just outside the basement door, hugging her knees and looking out onto the snow covered back lawn.

Mike removed the blanket from his shoulders and sat down next to her, covering them both with the warm fabric.

"What are you doing out here, El?" He asked softly. His arm was around her and she leaned in to him."

"I'm just thinking. I had a bad dream and I wanted to clear my head."

"Do you feel better now?" Mike asked.

"I'm not sure. I keep thinking about the night I ran away and what you said about if they had caught me. I think you're right. I think they would have made it so that I never had a choice. I really would have been a piece of equipment. They could have just stored me on a shelf. Maybe the universe hates me."

Mike thought about what to say. She seemed so fragile in that instant, the girl who could look at something and make it do



whatever she wanted. She looked more broken than he'd ever seen her.

"Maybe the universe is trying to make up for it. Maybe you'll get to be happy now. Maybe only good things will happen to you now."

He felt El shift so that she could put her arm around him.

"Maybe. There's *always* maybe. I'm just afraid that somewhere inside me I'll always feel like that kid who's all alone and scared, unwanted and unloved."

Mike kissed the side of her head. "I want you and I love you."

Mike realized a second too late that he had spoken instead of having the internal dialogue he thought he was having.

"What?" El looked up at him, her eyes wide and an expression of surprise on her face.

Mike couldn't backtrack. He had spoken the truth and he couldn't let her think for even a second that he hadn't meant what he said. Not tonight, not ever.

"I want you and I love you, El."

"You like, *love* me? Like, for *real*?"

"Like, for *real*. And you don't have to be alone anymore. And I hope you feel less scared."

"You love me." She stated it, like she was trying out the phrase.

Mike turned so that he could face her. She was looking at him incredulously and he had to smile. He realized then that he had been the first person to ever say that to her. He cupped her cheek in his hand, letting his thumb graze her skin.

"I *love* you, El. So much. I have never felt this way about anyone and I never want to *not* feel this way. When I think of you I smile,

when you say my name my heart beats faster, when you touch me it's electric. When I hold you I never want to let go and when I kiss you it's like there's a Tesla coil in my head and the currents are lighting up my brain. It's the best feeling ever. Except for when *you kiss me*."

He kissed her then. At first she was still awestruck but she seemed to come back to herself and started to kiss him back. It was slow at first, like she still wasn't sure, but then she gave into it and met him with more fervor, her fingers moving into his hair to pull him closer. Mike tried to make her feel all the things he had just said, to make her *feel* loved. He poured everything into the kiss, his sorrow for her past, his joy for her future, his love for her and the way she made him feel. He had said it all but he wanted to *show* her.

She suddenly pulled back. Her freshly kissed lips glistened in the Christmas lights overhead, causing Mike to have trouble looking away from them.

"I love you too, Mike. If love is how I feel when I'm around you, like I'm happier when I'm next to you but happiest when you're touching me, like when I can't wait to see you even though you're just in the next room, like no matter how good or bad my day has been, being with you always makes it better. If that's love then *I love you*. I dream about you and I think about you constantly. I don't ever want to be without you."

She smiled up at him and was met with a smile of his own.

"I'm pretty sure that's love, because that's exactly how I feel too. Being with you is just better than being anywhere else, better than doing anything else, better than anything I've ever done. I don't think it could ever be matched."

"I love you, Mike. I like saying that. It feels good. It feels like a truth that can't be disputed. Like *triangles have three sides*, or *the sun is hot*. It's just the way it is. And I'm happy that's the way it is."

"You feel happy now?" Mike moved his arm to pull her closer.

"I feel better. You make me feel better."

After a few more minutes sitting outside they returned to bed. El nestled herself against Mike and he felt her sigh contentedly as his arms enveloped her.

“Mike?” El asked quietly.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for the best Christmas ever. You made it into one of the best days of my life. The others are the day I met you and this past Halloween. You make my days better, Mike. Even when they get dark or stormy, you always are there to be the sun.”

Mike hugged her to him.

“And I’ll always try to do just that. Because I love you.”

They fell asleep, the events of the day seeming to melt away as El let herself sink into Mike’s embrace. She had faced her fear and she had been rewarded, she was sure of it. Her last thought before she drifted off was that she was falling asleep in the arms of someone who *loved* her, and it was the best feeling.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Our brave girl, she deserves the world. Mike is just the guy to give it to her. Now they can enjoy the rest of the break just having fun with their friends and El can experience what it’s like to be in love. The second semester of the school year is coming up. I wonder if anything big will happen...good or bad. Thanks as always for reading. I’m enjoying the ride, hope you are too.

## 7. Chapter 7

### Notes for the Chapter:

There is some drinking in this chapter but they are all of age. Also some talk of more adult situations but nothing happens and nothing is described. Just a heads up.

Mike and El spent the next week just hanging out with his friends and not doing anything much in particular. Will had suggested that they get some fireworks for New Year's Eve and everyone thought it sounded like a fun way to ring in the new year. He said he'd already cleared it with Chief Hopper, the policeman his mom was seeing, and that the chief had told him he'd look the other way if he had any noise complaints as long as Will and his friends cleaned everything up and there were no literal fires to put out.

So while the boys went off to buy fireworks for the night's festivities, El and Max had been left to go buy some alcohol so the group could have a small party amongst themselves until it was time for the fireworks. El was somewhat comfortable around Max but so far had always had Mike there with her. She was a bit nervous to be alone with this girl who had known Mike since they were kids.

They got to the store and El was surprised when Max grabbed a grocery cart.

"Would you rather carry all this liquid around with us?" Max asked, noticing the look on El's face.

She had a point.

They walked up and down the aisles, not really in any hurry. Max tossed a bottle of vodka and a bottle of tequila into the buggy.

"So, you and Wheeler. Is it serious? I know what he said but he can be a dramatic fool. What do *you* say about it?" Max asked El as they headed toward the back of the store. She stopped and put two

bottles of champagne into the basket.

El thought about Max's question, she knew *she* was serious and she thought Mike seemed to be as well.

"I think it's serious. We love each other." El's voice was quiet but firm.

Max gawked at El. "He told you he loves you? Mike Wheeler?"

El smiled. "Yes."

"Okay, but he tripped all over his words and was embarrassed and you practically had to pry it out of him, right?"

"No. He just told me, like it was one of his facts. He makes me feel better than I've ever felt."

Max looked at the girl, her eyes bright while talking about Mike, her smile almost contagious.

"If you say so. I just have a hard time picturing Mike in the role of boyfriend. How is he in bed?" Max and El had arrived at the beer cooler and she was trying to choose what she thought everyone would like.

El was quiet and Max took notice. "You don't have to tell me if it's too private."

"No, it's not that. We just kind of, haven't slept together like that. It's me. I'm just not ready. My life was kind of weird and I want to know it's right before I jump into anything. Does that make sense?"

"It does make sense. Especially if you love him, you want to be in the right head space. You want it to be worth remembering and if you do it when you aren't ready, even if you do love him, you might still have regrets at some point."

El was shocked at Max's no-nonsense answer. It hadn't been what she expected. It made her feel better about the whole situation. Max had

chosen the beer and they grabbed some orange juice and some lemon lime soda and headed to the checkout counter.

When they got back into the car El turned to Max. “It’s not that I don’t *want* to. I’m afraid I won’t do the right thing or that he won’t be happy. I’ve never been with anyone. We’ve made out a lot, sometimes for hours, and I’ve felt like I wanted more but I was afraid so I pulled back.”

“I think you’ll know when you’re ready, El. I think you should just do what you’re comfortable with. And you didn’t hear it from me, but I’m pretty sure Mike is no expert in that area either. When you’re ready you should both just talk to each other and do what feels right.” Max pulled out of the parking lot and headed back towards Mike’s house, where they all would meet.

“You’ve known Mike for a long time, right? Did you guys ever...?”

“Christ, no. My relationship with Mike has never been like that. He didn’t even seem to want to speak to me when I first moved to Hawkins. We were 13 years old and he was always angry and grouchy. Lucas and Dustin immediately started nerd stalking me but I found them to be endearing and they wanted me to be friends with them so I did, and I’m glad I did, but convincing Mike was harder. He didn’t want to let me in. Lucas told me that for almost the entire year before I met them Mike’s personality had changed. He said Mike once told him that it was like he’d felt like his life was about to change for the better and then he felt like whatever was going to make that change had been ripped away and he got depressed and lashed out sometimes. He finally pulled himself together but he spent a lot of time down at the quarry just staring at the water. He was weird for a while.”

El thought about what Mike had said when they were at the quarry looking at the water. Max’s words resonated inside her head. *He’d felt like his life was about to change for the better and then he felt like whatever was going to make that change had been ripped away.* What if he had felt some connection to her even then?

Max continued. “Anyway, he finally came back to himself and

decided he wanted to be a neurologist and go to school in Chicago even if it meant he'd be alone. He's spent the last two years working hard in school and I don't think he's even dated much. Now he has you, so I think something in him must have clicked. He seems way happier than I've ever known him to be. He's actually a great guy, though don't tell him I said that."

"He's the best. I don't know if I believe in fate or kismet or whatever but Mike feels like home. And I've never even really had a home to know what that feels like, but he just makes me feel safe. Like no matter what I did or said he'd still feel the same way about me. It's something I've never experienced."

"It's still funny to me that we're talking about Mike. You sound like you're describing some fairy tale knight in shining armor and I keep having to remind myself that you mean *Mike*." Max laughed. "But if he is really like that then I'm proud of him."

They had reached Mike's house and let themselves into the basement. They left the drinks in Max's car. They would wait for the boys and then when it was dark head over to the quarry, which wasn't really far from Mike's house.

While the girls were buying the night's libations the boys were choosing fireworks. Mike had put the kibosh on bottle rockets and firecrackers, saying that since they'd be drinking he didn't need to worry about having to take someone to the emergency room for getting their fingers blown off. Lucas was the expert in explosives since he'd had training at West Point, not specifically in fireworks but if he could handle all manner of guns and cannons then he could probably light the fuse on some small pyrotechnics.

They each had a basket, Dustin's was full of things that caused fish effects, falling leaves, and crackle effects. Will was getting all the chrysanthemum sorts, a few spiral effect ones, and some strobes. Lucas had some whirlwind and snow flake effects ones, and Mike had some of each. They had gone with all bigger and fancier fireworks, wanting to just see some pretty explosions rather than small Roman candles and fountain type mechanisms. Mike wanted it to be kind of

spectacular for El, though he hadn't said so to anyone.

They were making a second trip around the tent to make sure they hadn't missed anything.

"Mike, so are you going to make El see fireworks of her own later?" Dustin asked, snickering as he did. Lucas hit him on the arm.

"Dustin, man, you don't ask things like that." Lucas glared at him.

"Actually, Dustin, that would be up to El. I'm not going to rush her into anything. If I wait for five more years it's fine with me. She's *that* amazing." Mike tried not to sound annoyed.

"Sorry, man. I just think you two are nice together. She makes you smile. I noticed it." Dustin said, his head hanging a bit lower.

"I noticed it too." Will stepped up beside Mike, closing the circle they were now creating with their bodies. "Your whole face lights up when you talk about her, and when you look at her it's like you're looking at something unbelievable, like a unicorn or the Phoenix, or a superhero. It's like there's no one else in the room. I'd be offended if it didn't make me so happy to see you that way."

"Yeah, Mike. She seems to think the same way about you. I try not to stare but I noticed how she watches you walk away and her smile falters until you return. I don't think she's even aware of how her face changes depending on your proximity to her. She seems way more relaxed when you're beside her and she laughs a lot more. It's not in a needy, clingy way either. It's like she's genuinely happier when she's with you."

Mike listened to his friends. It made him feel good that they could see how much he and El cared about each other. He liked that it was so obvious.

"Meeting her might be the best thing that has ever happened to me, guys. I'm serious. The feelings I have for her are *intense* but not in some sexual hormonal way. It's deeper than that. It's on a different level than that."



“So she’s living in your spare room? Does it get hard to not just go sleep with her? I mean, just sleep? You know, lying there sleeping?” Will asked.

“We do sometimes. It’s nice. I like falling asleep with her in my arms. But I won’t lie, it sometimes gets a little heated and we both pull back. I want it to be her decision.”

“You’re doing the right thing. If it’s as serious as it seems to be then I think you’ll have the rest of your lives to get as heated as you want.” Will offered, his eyes lighting up and his mouth pulling into a smirk.

“She’s so quiet. You know what they say about the quiet ones.” Dustin laughed, winking at Mike.

Mike laughed him off but inside was letting himself think about Dustin’s statement. He was pretty sure if El was ever ready she would blow his mind.

They paid for their fireworks and made their way back to Mike’s house. The sun was just starting to set but they still had close to six and a half hours until the new year. Since Max had more room in her car they put all of the fireworks in her trunk with the alcohol and went inside. They could all fit in the one car to go to the quarry a little later.

The boys found El and Max just sitting in the basement chatting like they were old friends. El and Mike grinned at each other when he came inside. He could see that she no longer seemed nervous. Her smile was easy and he felt himself melt a little bit.

They ordered some pizzas and when it finally arrived they ate. Max complained that they should have known that on New Year’s Eve all the pizza places would be busy. It was still only a little before 8:00 though so once they finished eating they started to get ready to go to the quarry.

Mike knew El didn’t have much in the way of winter clothing besides her coat and a beanie that he’d given her so he was taking her

upstairs to see if Holly would let her borrow some gloves and anything else. He noticed that Dustin was coming with them.

“Where are *you* going?” Mike asked him.

“I’m going to see if your mom has any chips or pudding or something else we can take with us for snacks.”

“Dustin, we *just* ate!”

“I know, but it’ll be cold and our bodies will burn up that energy and we’ll need something. Trust me, Mike. I know what I’m doing.” Dustin passed them on the stairway, disappearing into the kitchen.

Mike shook his head, pulling El along with him up the stairs and then up to Holly’s room.

Holly was happy to lend El some of her winter clothes. She had gloves, some thermal underwear, a fleece jacket that El could wear underneath her coat, and a scarf. El thought she would definitely be warm enough. She went into the hall bathroom to put on the thermal undershirt and pants underneath her own clothing, leaving Mike in Holly’s room.

“I like her, Mike.” Holly stated. “She’s nice and she makes you happy. I can tell. You look at her differently than you look at everyone else. It’s cute.”

Mike wasn’t used to having conversations about his love life with his little sister.

“I’m glad you like her, Holls. She is pretty amazing.”

It didn’t take long for El to return. She smiled at Holly.

“Thank you for letting me borrow these things.”

“It’s no problem. You guys have fun tonight. I wish I could come too.” Holly whined but it was only for show.

“Maybe when you’re older, kid.” He ruffled her hair, causing her to punch him, and then Mike and El went back down to the basement.

They all piled into Max’s car. Lucas had gotten some extra blankets from his parents’ house while Mike and El were upstairs and Will had a plastic bag with cups, a lighter, a flashlight, and Dustin’s snacks that he had taken from Karen. Max had brought a portable CD player that accepted USB flash drives so they could have music. Dustin had another bag that contained a thermos of hot cocoa and some trash bags so they could clean up after they were finished. Max had put the alcohol into an ice chest with ice that Lucas brought back after getting the blankets from his house.

When they got to the quarry El was surprised to see that they drove down close to the water. There was a big opening where Max could park and the ground was flat, allowing them to lay out blankets to sit on and making it easier for Lucas to set off the fireworks later. They would shoot up and explode over the water.

Lucas found some small logs and built a fire to keep them warm, making sure to set stones around it. Since they were in the quarry he had no trouble finding the stones. Once the fire was lit everyone could see better. They set the blankets out as close to the fire as they could, making sure that nothing would pop out onto the blankets and cause them to burn. Mike and El claimed one while Lucas and Max shared another. Will and Dustin hugged and laughed and acted like they were a couple as well, making everyone laugh.

“What all did you get, MadMax?” Lucas asked his girlfriend as Dustin started handing out cups.

“We have plenty. But liquor before beer, never fear, so let’s start with that.” She took out the bottles of vodka and tequila from the ice chest along with the juice and soda. “El, what’s your poison?” Max looked in her direction.

El had never been one to drink so she wasn’t even sure how to answer the question.

“Um, well I don’t want to throw up so could you just make me

something that doesn't make me do that?" El asked her new friend.

Max nodded and proceeded to pour some vodka into El's cup, topping it off with orange juice and giving it just a splash of soda, the carbonation meant to mask the alcohol taste somewhat.

Mike inserted a flash drive into Max's music player. "This is an '80's mix I made. I hope you're all cool with that. Though there is other stuff on here if not."

They all agreed that the '80's music was fine and sat around drinking and laughing. El was feeling a little tipsy after her second drink and lay back on the blanket. She could see so many stars. Mike joined her, both of them looking at the celestial bodies. Mike pointed out Ursa Major to her. El smiled to herself, letting him think he was showing her something she didn't already know. She surprised him when she pointed out Cassiopeia and Draco. She giggled when his jaw hung open, his eyes roaming back and forth from where she was pointing in the sky to her face.

"Is there anything you don't know?" Mike asked, his face inches from hers.

"I don't know what I did to find you," she whispered. Mike leaned down and kissed her.

"Hey, hey now! There will be time for that later. Let's dance!" Dustin was on his feet, standing right over Mike and El's blanket. He was starting to do a weird Dustin dance as *When Doves Cry* by Prince started to play.

They all got up and began to dance around. El laughed, Mike looked awkward but he was laughing too, everyone having a good time. When the song was over the next one was *Sister Christian* which Dustin belted at the top of his lungs, though his voice was nice so no one minded. Max was singing too and she held on to El's shoulder, singing to her.

*Sister Christian*  
*There's so much in life*

*Don't you give it up  
Before your time is due  
It's true  
It's true yeah*

And then all of them joined in on the chorus. El felt more included than she'd ever felt. They were laughing and spinning. El sat down on the blanket hard, having gotten a little too spin crazy. Mike sat down beside her.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, I just got a little spinny. I'll just sit here for a bit. I'll be fine."

Soon everyone else sat down as well, all of them feeling some effects from the alcohol. Max made everyone another round of drinks and they talked for a while.

"When is everyone going back to school?" Will asked.

"I'm leaving Wednesday. I'm not really looking forward to wearing the uniform all the time again but it's mandatory. In the long run I think it'll be worth it. I think." Lucas sipped his beer.

"I don't have to go back until the day or so before classes start. I'm going to let my mom cook and clean for me for as long as I can." Dustin sat back on his blanket.

"Me too. And Jonathan is home right now so it's cool hanging out with him. He'll only be there until the day after tomorrow though. I'm staying until next weekend." Will told the group.

That left Mike and El. Mike hadn't really discussed it with her yet but he was ready to be back home.

"I think we'll probably go back tomorrow some time. That's why I wanted to spend New Year's with you all. I won't see you again for a few months. But it will be nice to sleep in my own bed and we still both need to register for spring classes."

“How did you do last semester?” Max asked him.

“All A’s, both of us.” Mike answered. El blushed but it went unnoticed.

“Your children will be geniuses.” Dustin joked.

Everyone laughed at his comment but El felt Mike’s hand touch hers and a warm smile spread across her face.

“Hey, El, what’s the craziest thing Mike has ever done for you?” Everyone was in a good mood and Dustin grinned at her as he asked. It was in no way malicious and she felt like answering him honestly.

“Um, I wouldn’t say it was *crazy* but it was definitely unexpected. And we weren’t even really that close at the time. Mike once sang to me in the hallway of the chem building.”

She could tell that everyone was shocked by this information.

“Get out!” Max shouted. “What did he sing?”

“He sang *Sweet Jane* to me when he wanted me to come eat with him so he didn’t have to eat alone.”

Then she explained that her name was actually Jane and that El was a nickname. She didn’t elaborate and no one seemed to question her about it.

“I so wish I could have been there to hear that! Mike Wheeler *singing* to a girl. You clearly have an effect on him that can’t be denied.” Max was smiling at El in approval.

“It’s true,” Mike said. “She’s so special. The feelings I have, what she makes me feel, it’s like a head massage and a back scratch that goes on forever. It’s the best.”

“Okay, Mike. You’re drunk.” Lucas laughed.

“I’m just saying, I love her.” Mike turned to look at her. She was

sitting beside him on the blanket, her cup in her hand. He grinned dopily at her. "I love you, El."

El touched his cheek. "I know you do, Mike. I love you too."

Will and Max each clutched their chests while Dustin and Lucas *awwwed* at the same time.

"You two are ridiculous. Let's get these fireworks started!" Max called out. Lucas was on his feet in an instant and everyone watched. He had set everything up much earlier so that all he'd have to do was light each one. He had made sure to build up and then save a few for his finale.

Mike held El against him as they looked up at the sky. The first of the explosions sent a wave of red and white sparks tumbling up and then showering down. Seeing the lights over the quarry was perfect, El thought to herself. The show went on. Everyone was gasping at the colors, the loud bangs causing them to jump every time even though they knew what was coming.

Lucas made the show last for quite a while. Max yelled to him when it was getting close to midnight so that he could set off the finale as the year changed. Mike held El closer.

Dustin started counting down as Lucas lit the fuse. The bang was much louder and then there was a bright light, with fiery greens, reds, purples, and whites dancing in the sky, spiraling out before exploding again into flower like forms. Mike was the only one who noticed El looking intently at the explosion. He wanted to laugh when what should have fallen to the ground suddenly reignited and went up, exploding again somehow. Everyone else cried out in amazement. Mike hugged El to him, his forehead against hers, both of them smiling at their shared secret.

"I'm glad I get to start the year with you, El." Mike said as he kissed her. She tilted her head so she could kiss him even deeper.

"Happy New Year, Mike," she whispered before kissing him again, both of them smiling.

After all of the spent fireworks and any trash they had created was cleaned up Max drove them home, dropping Will and Dustin off at Will's before going back to Mike and Lucas's neighborhood. Max was spending the night with Lucas so Mike and El just walked back to Mike's from Lucas' driveway. Max gave them a bottle of champagne, saving the other for Lucas and herself.

"I've had a fun time but I'm ready to be home. Are you?" Mike asked El as they walked hand in hand back to his house. They could still hear the bangs of fireworks going off in the distance but couldn't see any explosions.

"Yeah. I really liked hanging out with your friends and your mom is great but I like just being with *you* the most. It's easier."

They entered the basement. The house was quiet.

"Do you want to open this champagne? We don't have to." Mike asked.

"It is New Year's and I've never tasted champagne." El replied, a slow smile spreading.

Mike went upstairs to get a couple of glasses. When he returned El was in her pajamas sitting on the bed. Mike set the glasses on the table with the champagne and got changed himself. He turned on some music.

"Do you want to do the honors?" Mike asked, holding the bottle out to El. He had expected her to take it from him but she just looked at it and then the cork slowly popped up, not even shooting across the room. She had so much control over it that she lifted it as though her mind was a human corkscrew. Mike was amazed.

He poured both of them a glass of champagne and sat down next to El on the bed.

"It's fizzy. I like it better than the one with orange juice," El said as she sipped from her glass. "It's weird how I feel like saying things I



normally would never say out loud.”

“That’s what it does. It relaxes your inhibitions. What would you say now that you normally wouldn’t say?” He teased her.

“I’d say I really like sleeping next to you and I want to sleep that way every night. I’d say I’m sorry I’m so slow and I want to do so much more with you and I get scared that I always pull back. I’m afraid you’ll get tired of that at some point.”

Mike frowned. “No, El, I can wait as long as it takes. Loving you means that I love everything about you so if you aren’t ready then I love that about you too. Please don’t ever think that I’d get tired of you. That won’t happen.” He leaned over and kissed her. “You don’t ever have to worry about that.”

They finished their glasses and El yawned, feeling both tired from being up so late as well as a little tipsy. Mike took her glass and set it next to his, away from the mattresses so that they wouldn’t be stepped on if anyone got up in the night. He left the music playing softly but turned out the lights, finally crawling onto the bed beside her.

“So tomorrow we’ll go home.” Mike pulled her to him and she took her favorite position of resting her head on his chest while he played with her hair.

“Okay. Though when I’m with you I feel like I’m home no matter where we are. You always make me feel safe. I know I can take care of myself but it’s different to *feel safe*. I never had that.”

Mike looked down at her and she met his gaze, her eyes darker than before. She leaned into him and they kissed. El knew she still wasn’t ready for more but as they spent the next hour or so kissing she started to think that *soon* might not be as far off as she had previously thought.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I’ll be glad to get them back home to their

apartment. I wouldn't say this is my best chapter. I find it difficult to write everyone. I like it when it's just Mike and El. I hope it was at least readable though. The next chapter will have more highs and lows and maybe (definitely) at least one harrowing adventure. Thanks for sticking with me. I appreciate it. And did anyone else see the season 3 pics posted today? El in glasses? Ha! Remember who called it. :)

## 8. Chapter 8

### Notes for the Chapter:

Trigger warning for this chapter! Just a heads up, I don't want to spoil it but I do want to warn about an unfortunate event that happens once El and Mike get back to school. I also changed the rating because there were things I wanted to talk about that I didn't feel I could do in the confines of the T rating.

El was glad to be back home, back in the apartment she now shared with Mike. He was still sleeping. She was watching new snow fall from the front window, drinking a warm cup of tea and thinking to herself how her life had changed so dramatically in the last few months.

On their trip back from Hawkins they had talked about what classes they each would take the next semester and El had brought up the fact that while she already had a lot of science hours under her belt she had been thinking a lot about what Mike had said, that if she did find a way to rid herself of her special gift she might not be the same. That wasn't what she wanted. So she had been thinking a lot about taking some psychology classes, thinking maybe she could get into some sort of psychopharmacology. She understood chemistry like it was microwave popcorn instructions and her biology hours were as easy for her as putting on socks. She wanted to understand the whole mind though and perhaps cure some mental diseases or at the very least *understand* why she was the way she was.

She was sitting on the sofa looking at psychology courses on her laptop when Mike walked in, his hair a mess like it was every morning. It made her smile.

"I think I'm going to take both Cognitive and Developmental Psychology this semester. I already have enough hours that I can spare a few elective ones. Next year I can finish up everything and then use graduate school to complete my biomedical science degree. I think the added psych classes could just help me understand things

a little more.” El was scrolling through her options.

Mike got his laptop as well and joined her on the sofa. She threw a blanket over their legs.

“I need to take Fundamentals of Cell and Molecular Biology and Fundamentals of Genetics. I’m only a few courses short of finishing my major. I might be able to slip in a couple of classes that I’m just interested in. I really like Creative Writing. If I take one more class I can minor in it.” Mike had logged into the university’s catalog and was trying to select the class times that would work for him.

Once they had their classes picked out they compared and found that they didn’t overlap at all this semester but decided it was fine since they lived together and would see each other every day. El noticed that one of her psych classes wasn’t located far from a biology lecture class that Mike had at the same time on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays so they would be able to meet and go home together on those days. Overall they were happy with their class load. It would be a lot of work but they were both used to doing a lot of schoolwork. And now they had each other for support.

Mike noticed that El had gotten quiet. He wondered why at first and then he remembered that they still had to buy textbooks.

“Hey, El? It’s okay.” Mike shifted closer to her. “I still love you.”

El was beginning to cry. Using her skills or powers or whatever they could be called had never been a huge issue to her before when it came to paying for school things. Now she had Mike and didn’t want to disappoint him by cheating the computer to get what she needed. She wanted him to be proud of her and she didn’t know how he could be when she was basically a thief.

“Come here.” Mike pulled her into him. He used his free hand to set her computer on the coffee table. She pulled her legs up until she was a ball against his side. “Someday you will do something amazing that will help the world. You will pay them back that way. I know it. You are going to make a difference, some way.”

El just listened to him, wanting to believe him.

“Can I watch you do it?” Mike asked. His fingers on her back were both calming and reassuring.

“Um, I guess so.”

She sat up and picked up her computer. In just a few clicks and keystrokes Mike could see that she was in the files of the bursar and was communicating with the computer in a series of zeroes and ones. She found her name and opened her file and Mike watched as she added \$3000 to a fund listed in the file. She explained that she had set it up as a sort of bank account, like a scholarship meant for miscellaneous things, and would add money to it as she needed books and other school related items, only at the beginnings of semesters so it would coincide with other incoming funds from scholarships for many students.

Mike was quite impressed. “Maybe you should just take down evil corporations with your computer magicry.”

“I’d rather help people some other way. But if worse comes to worst, I guess I can always try that.” She grinned and winked at him and Mike felt glad that she seemed to be feeling better about what she was doing.

It was snowing hard the first Monday back at school. El couldn’t say she’d had the best day, having spilled someone’s coffee on her way to her seat in one class, causing them to swear at her. She could have stopped the spill but it would have been too obvious that something very strange had just occurred. She sat quietly through the class. Then in her Cognitive Psychology class she was running behind due to the weather conditions and she wound up having to sit at the back of the class, where she discovered that she’d left her glasses at home and couldn’t see very well. She was ready for the day to just be *over*.

She met Mike in front of the main library for the school, Harper Memorial, on what in the late spring and summer was an expansive quad that connected several other buildings. Now it was a vast white

space. The sky was dreary and El felt like that summed up her entire day.

Mike could see before he even got really close to her that she didn't look happy.

"What's wrong?" He asked as he got to her.

"I just want to go home."

Mike nodded and took her bag from her. They walked together across the quad to a side street where he had parked that morning.

When they got home El dropped face first onto her bed.

"I hope tomorrow is better." Her voice was muffled by the blankets.

"Want to talk about it?" Mike asked.

"It's just dumb stuff that alone wouldn't be anything big but all put together equaled me having one bad day. I'll be okay." She had rolled over and was lying on her back.

"Well how about," Mike sat down on her bed, "I make us some popcorn and we can watch something funny, like *Arrested Development* or *30 Rock* or something else if you want and we can just eat popcorn and snuggle and forget about today? Want to? I have all the seasons on DVD." As he spoke he got closer and upon finishing his sentence began to tickle her. She shrieked and laughed.

"Stop! Stop," she laughed, trying to catch her breath. "That sounds good to me. I'd love to forget today."

Mike made popcorn while El put the first disc of season one of *Arrested Development* into the DVD player. He was back quickly, bringing with him a big bowl of popcorn and two sodas. El was waiting for him underneath a large fuzzy blanket, the lights out, ready to start forgetting the day.

They laughed and Mike quoted some of the dialogue, he was a big fan. El loved the quirky family, their chicken dances especially. She was feeling better and it was because of Mike.

When it got late they went to their separate bedrooms, having said goodnight on the sofa for a little longer than they'd planned. El was lying in her bed when she started to get a strange feeling. She felt uneasy, like something was coming but she didn't know what. No matter what she did or told herself she couldn't shake the feeling. She got up to get a drink of water.

The water didn't make the feeling go away or even lessen any. She found herself standing outside Mike's door. She knocked softly. "Mike?" She opened the door slowly, not wanting to barge in on him.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" He asked.

"Could I sleep in here tonight? With you?" She sounded small and a little afraid.

"Sure. Come on." He held back the covers and she slipped underneath them. She put her arms around him like he was a giant teddy bear and hid her face in his chest. "Are you okay?"

"I just started feeling like something is going to happen. Something bad. I can't stop feeling it. I feel dread and worry and anger and so much fear. That's the only way I can explain it. I'm scared, Mike."

Mike embraced her, trying to make her feel safe. "Maybe you'll feel better tomorrow. Try to sleep. I'll be right here." He held her head with one hand, knowing that she liked it when his fingers were in her hair. "I'll do whatever you need me to do."

"You already are. Thanks, Mike."

The next few days went more smoothly. El was still having the feeling of uneasiness but she pushed it aside to focus on her classes. It had finally stopped snowing on Thursday but was still quite drab

outside.

She had gone back to sleeping in her own bed, wanting to be strong and not rely on Mike for every little thing, even if sleeping next to him was one of her favorite things. When she woke up on Friday morning there was sunlight streaming through her window and she could smell bacon.

“Good morning!” Mike smiled as El entered the kitchen. “I thought since it’s finally sunny out we could celebrate with breakfast before we leave. And I’ll take you out to dinner tonight. Would that be okay?”

El nodded. The feeling seemed stronger this morning but she didn’t want to bring down Mike’s good mood. He had set everything on the table, his hands finally free, and she crossed to him and hugged him fiercely.

“Hey!” She had caught him off guard, then he softened. “Hey, it’s okay, El.” He held her for a little longer, knowing that something was wrong but not wanting to force it out of her.

They ate and got ready to leave. Mike drove them to campus where they parted, planning to meet at their usual place on the quad beside the tree after their last classes. Just before they went their separate ways, Mike smiled.

“See? It’s Friday and it’s sunny, a beautiful day for winter in Chicago, and nothing bad has happened. I’ll see you this afternoon.” He started to walk away.

“Mike!” El called after him. He turned around. El could see his smile even before his body was completely turned. It made her chest hurt, in a good way. “I love you.”

“I love you too, El.” He smiled even more brightly at her and then was gone.

The quad in front of the library was a canvas that was currently painted with people moving all about it, going from building to



building. The sun filtered through the bare trees, the early afternoon starting to give way to shadows. El was waiting for Mike and watching the people. Some were laughing, a couple of guys were throwing snowballs at each other, the smiles on their faces wide. It was now the start of the weekend and everyone seemed happy and relaxed.

El saw Mike walking toward her, his dark hair flopping in the breeze as he picked up his step when he saw her waiting for him. He had just gotten to where she was standing beside the tree and was about to say something when there was a series of loud noises, feeling it in his eardrums before actually hearing the sounds.

He pulled El behind the tree and peered around it. On top of the library at the base of the quad was a figure. Mike could see the long barrel of a gun. The shots continued and Mike saw two people fall. Everyone was running in different directions, screaming. It occurred to him that they were all moving targets on the blank white ground. His heart was in his throat, not believing this was happening.

Another person fell, blood coloring the ground like spilled paint. As Mike looked on in horror, El left his grasp. She walked with purpose toward the library.

“El! Please come back!” Mike saw the snow beside her feet puff up as a bullet hit just next to her. Then another puff from the other side of her body.

All the sounds faded away. Mike could only watch El, the person he loved the most in the world, as she faced off against the shooter. He could see her staring up at him, her jaw set, her shoulders square. He could feel tears in his eyes. He knew that people were still running around, some checking on the fallen, but everything was happening in slow motion.

*Please be safe. Please come back to me. Please.*

Mike had never been so scared. The gun was aimed straight for her now. She was so close to it, almost at the base of the library steps and the man was just on the roof above her. Mike could see that he

was peering into the scope on his rifle, aiming, aiming for El.

He pulled the trigger and Mike screamed, but at that moment every bullet left in his gun exploded at the same time, taking his right hand off and obliterating his face. Mike watched his body slump backwards and then it was out of Mike's sight. Instead he saw four policemen scramble toward where the gunman had fallen. Then he looked back at El.

She had been standing but now she seemed wobbly and as Mike ran to her she collapsed on the ground. Her face was a mess of blood, both nostrils caked with dried blood due to the cold and Mike could see that her nose was still bleeding heavily.

"El? Come on, come on, wake up!" Mike looked up but realized quickly that help needed to go to the people who had been shot. He would have to take care of El himself. He picked her up and started to carry her to his car. As he walked, sirens coming from several different directions, some EMTs already on the scene attending to casualties, he saw that one person who had been shot was moving, so at least they weren't dead. He hoped the same for the others.

El still hadn't stirred as Mike eased her into the back seat of his car and drove home as quickly as he could. Once home, he put her in his bed and started washing her face, being as gentle as possible. He was crying, though he didn't realize it until tears fell onto El's arm.

"You're going to be okay. You're safe. I'll stay here with you. Please wake up." It was like a mantra that Mike kept repeating.

After getting her clean he sat next to her on the bed, holding her hand. After a few hours of pleading with her to wake up, he started to sing to her.

El had walked up to base of the library knowing what she was going to do. She wasn't going to let him hurt more people. She focused on the bullets in the gun, sending energy to the powder, causing pressure to build up, and when he pulled the trigger the tension was popped and everything exploded onto him. She had noticed the

pleased look on his face just before he tried to shoot her and didn't feel bad that he had gotten quite a different surprise. But then she was so weak, falling quickly to the ground. Her nose hadn't bled in years so she knew she had been using a lot of force.

She didn't remember the aftermath, didn't remember Mike picking her up and carrying her to the car. She wasn't aware of how he cleaned her face, how he tucked her into his bed, how he held her hand. She was out for hours, deep stage 4 sleep, unaware of anything going on around her.

Now she was dreaming. She couldn't find Mike but she could hear him. She was searching hallways that stretched forever, trying to follow his voice. He was singing to her. *Sweet Jane*. She desperately wanted to find him. She called out his name countless times, feeling more alone each time.

Finally she entered a room that looked like Mike's basement in Hawkins. It looked the same as it had at Christmas but there was a blanket fort in the corner, which she thought was both weird and expected. Inside the fort was Mike. She sat down beside him and he began to talk, telling her that she had to come back, she had to wake up, that he loved her and couldn't lose her.

Mike rested his head on El's chest after he finished the song, her heartbeat was strong and she was breathing, which gave him *some* comfort but he wanted her to wake up so badly, just for a few seconds, just so he would know that she was okay.

"Please, El. You have to come back to me. You have to wake up. I love you so much. I can't lose you."

Mike felt her hand move for the first time, going from her side to his hair. He could feel her fingers moving slowly. He raised his head just a little, enough to see her but not enough to pull her hand from his hair. She was looking at him. She smiled weakly.

"I found you," she whispered.

Mike moved so that his head was in her neck, wanting to be close to her.

“I was so scared. You stopped him, El. You were amazing. You are a hero. You’re a real superhero.”

“Some people got hurt, Mike. I couldn’t save them all. I wasn’t fast enough.”

“But a lot more could have been hurt, El. You stopped that from happening. And I saw one person still moving so maybe it’ll still be okay.”

“Do you think anyone saw me?” El asked, suddenly worried about her public display.

“You were just looking at him. I don’t think anyone would believe it if I told them what happened. But you were bleeding so much. I was afraid you wouldn’t come back.”

El weakly lifted her hand and let it rest on his cheek. “I’ll always come back to you.”

Mike got her to drink some water but then she fell back to sleep. He planted himself beside her, taking her in his arms and holding her, his fear from earlier lessened but still lingering. He put his hand over her heart so he could feel it beat as he fell asleep.

It was late on Saturday evening when El finally felt like getting out of bed. She felt better when Mike got her to eat some soup and by the nighttime she was almost back to her old self. She still felt a little weak. Mike had found out that of the seven people who had been shot only one hadn’t made it. El was sad but Mike pointed out that she had saved so many other people. She had acted quickly and that had helped so many. If he shot seven people in just a matter of seconds he could have done much more damage in minutes.

“I don’t know what I would have done if he’d gotten you.” After brushing her teeth El found Mike in his room. She climbed into his

bed, not even having discussed how they were sleeping that night. She was sitting on her knees, wearing one of his t-shirts.

“He didn’t get me. I was so scared when he had the gun pointed at you, El. It was an awful thing to see.” Mike was sitting on his side of the bed, not far from El. Even when she was on her knees his head was still a bit above hers.

“But he didn’t get me either.” She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his, barely touching him.

Mike sat up a little higher, his hands moving to her waist, as she closed the gap between them again, kissing deeper this time, with more purpose. He felt like he couldn’t get close enough to her. The horror from the previous day, the adrenaline, the worry, he needed to give her all the affection he could. He had been afraid he’d not get the chance after yesterday.

“Mike,” El breathed, “I’m ready.”

Mike didn’t have to ask what she meant. He could feel it in her touch, in the way her muscles reacted to him. He could feel it in her kiss.

The fire ignited and they fumbled a bit, as new lovers do, but figured it out for themselves without too much trouble, both laughing at their semi-awkwardness before the laughter faded into raw desire. They found their rhythm, fitting together as though there could never be anyone else, as though they were lock and key.

Their intimacy was unparalleled. They both felt a new closeness, a new connection, and they knew that together they could face anything. They fell asleep tangled together and both of them slept better than they had in weeks.

Unbeknownst to either of them, someone had been filming while they were on the quad that day and there was footage of El staring at the gunman.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Oh, what will happen? Whatever it is, Mike and El will take it on together. Thanks for reading. This chapter didn't turn out exactly as I'd hoped but sometimes that happens I guess. And dang it! I was wrong about El having glasses in season 3 but she's keeping them for this story. I like her in them.

## 9. Chapter 9

Rousing slowly, wanting to stay in the dream she was having, El finally opened her eyes. *Oh, I'm not dreaming.* Beside her lay a sleeping Mike, the beginnings of dawn sprinkling color on his face through the crack in the curtains. She took a moment to drink him in, watching his face, relaxed now in sleep. She replayed the events of the previous night in her head, smiling at the memory. Her finger traced his lips softly. Did everyone feel like this when they were in love? She certainly hoped so.

She watched as Mike started to wake up, loving his sleepy eyes. She moved closer to him, her skin pressed against his, feeling the warmth radiating from him. She slid her leg over his thigh so she could get even closer.

Now fully awake, Mike adjusted his arms, his left hand around her waist pulling her into him while his right hand found her hair.

“I think I love waking up like this.” Mike sighed.

“I know I do.” El drew nonsensical circles on his chest with her finger.

A couple of hours later, after the encore for their prior night's performance, both feeling happy and warm and so very relaxed, they pulled themselves from their nest of love to find some breakfast. Mike remembered that he had turned his phone off so he wouldn't be bothered while he was taking care of El after he'd brought her home from the horrible incident.

He was greeted with thirty-two messages from his mother and five from Dustin. He didn't even listen to them, deciding to just call them both. His mother had been beside herself with worry once she'd heard the news and not being able to reach him had only made it worse for her but after Mike explained that he and El were both in a little bit of shock and just wanted to regroup, that they were both unhurt, she seemed calmer.

Then he called Dustin.

“Dude! Have you checked your email? I sent you a link. You have to watch it. There’s video of the shooting and I’m pretty sure El is on it. What was she doing? She could have been killed!”

Mike was moving with catlike reflexes, grabbing his laptop and heading to the kitchen to find El.

“I’m checking it now. She’s fine.” Mike tried to hide how frantic he suddenly was. El looked at him questioningly as he opened his computer and found the link in his email.

“That guy just, like, *exploded*! I guess he didn’t make sure his gun was clean, or something. That was crazy!” Dustin went on as El joined Mike at the table and they both watched.

The video was clearly taken by a student. It started with what appeared to be a couple of girls talking about their weekend plans. From the angle, it looked like they were all on the opposite side of the quad from where Mike and El had been, under the awning of another building. The sounds of the shots started and the camera panned to find the source, shakily zooming in on the man on the roof of the library. Then the angle got wider, as if she had zoomed back out to get more in the picture.

Mike could see El walking to the library. The video showed her walk into frame at the left of the picture. Whoever filmed it had the forethought to turn their phone sideways so they could get more in the shot and as they panned both El and the gunman could be seen. It really did look like a showdown, but El was so small, standing in the snow in her long goose down puffer jacket and grey and white beanie.

“We’re both watching it, Dustin. When did it get posted?”

“Yesterday afternoon some time. It hasn’t been up that long. Is El really okay? It looked like she passed out or fell down. I can imagine seeing that from right there would be enough to make you faint,” Dustin said, “though from what I saw if looks could kill she accomplished her goal.” He chuckled.



Mike and El were still watching the video. On the screen they could see El just staring at the man. It was only her profile but they could see her determined expression. Then came the last shot fired which was extremely loud since all the bullets exploded at once. There was an eruption of blood when the blast hit the gunman's face but then he was down and nothing more of him could be seen. The last part of the video pulled back to see more of the ground and showed El wobbling before falling.

Mike and El shared a worried look.

"Yeah, she didn't realize what was happening when she walked up to the library. She got really lucky. She also got a nosebleed, I guess maybe from the cold and the shock of seeing that. She's okay now. Um, Dustin, thanks for checking on us and sending that link. There are some things I need to do so I've gotta go." Mike was already trying to think of a plan for just in case other people started asking questions.

"Sure, man. Tell El I'm glad she's okay. She really is crazy," Dustin laughed. "She's my friend and she's crazy."

When Mike got off the phone El was shaking.

"Are there pictures of you in your University file?" Mike asked, embracing her as she shook.

"I wore a wig in my student ID picture and that's the one on file. Jane Hawkins is blonde, if anyone looked her up."

"Okay, that's good. Your name isn't attached to the video. And it's only from the side, your whole face isn't shown, you can't even see what color eyes you have."

"I'm still worried." She tried to listen to his heart, hoping it would calm her down some. "If Dustin saw that then I'm sure lots of other people did too. What if they find me, Mike?"

Mike held on to her even tighter. He had the same fear. He did what

he always did and thought of the facts, the details that couldn't be disputed. No one knew where El lived. No one knew that she and Mike Wheeler were anything more than lab partners the previous semester. There wasn't a picture of what El really looked like on file and the girl in the video could only be recognized by someone who knew her. It had also been a Friday afternoon and the girl could have been visiting someone on campus. He let his scientific mind try to allay his fears.

"They're not going to find you. And even if they do I won't let them take you. It's going to be okay."

El didn't go to class on Monday. Mike did, wanting to listen to gossip and see what people were saying about the shooting, see if anyone mentioned the video.

The day was agonizingly slow. Mike wanted to be at home with El but he had been listening all day and hadn't heard anyone mention the strange occurrence of the girl staring at the gunman just before his weapon malfunctioned. There was talk about the victims, about the boy who got killed, but he never heard anything that made him think they were talking about El.

El was at home trying to pass the time. She turned on the television and saw that the video had made the 24 hour news shows but the news anchors weren't turning their attention to her. They focused more on the shooter. One channel did mention the girl at the base of the library, but they said that the gunman had scared her so much she froze. El decided that would be a good thing for people to think.

Mike got home a little later than El had expected him. He was carrying a bag from an electronics store. She waited until he'd removed his coat and then she buried her face in his chest.

"What did they say at school?" She turned her face to the side so he could hear her but otherwise didn't change the position of her body. Mike held her close to him.

“I didn’t hear anything that sounded like they were talking about *you*. People were just talking about how they couldn’t believe that happened at our school and asking if they’d identified the shooter. So far they haven’t released his name.”

El felt herself relax a little. If they were going to talk about her they’d be doing it already.

“Hey, I got you something today.” Mike released her so he could show her what was in the bag. “I don’t like the idea of you not having a phone or of me not being able to keep in touch with you when we’re in different places. Since Friday happened I kind of need to know that if I need to tell you something or if you need *me* we have a way to do that. So I got you a phone.”

He held the small box out to her. It was the same model as his own phone.

“You can load anything you want onto it. It’s yours. I just want to be able to call you and text you. And hopefully I won’t make you sick of me by doing it.”

“Mike,” El looked into his eyes, “I could *never* get sick of you. Even if you call me every hour. I want to know that you’re safe too.”

The following Wednesday, El returned to school. She couldn’t miss more classes and she didn’t want to fall behind. She felt comforted by having a way she could communicate with Mike throughout the day and it sharpened her focus, knowing that if she needed him she could let him know, or vice versa. Everything went more smoothly for the most part for the next few weeks. Talk had shifted from the shooting to more normal conversations, about Valentine’s Day and upcoming midterms. Spring break was a phrase that was also already being bandied about.

It was the first week in February when she felt it again. El was in one of her chemistry classes when she started to feel uneasy, just like she had the week before the shooting. It felt more urgent this time

though, like impending doom, like she didn't have days to feel it before actions were required.

She texted Mike. Her class still had another thirty minutes before it was finished.

*I feel it again. I don't know what to do, Mike! It feels much stronger than before. I wish you were here.*

Her phone vibrated just a few seconds later.

*I'll meet you in the atrium of your building in ten minutes. It's going to be okay.*

El waited a few minutes and then packed up her things and quietly exited the lecture. She was stealthy as she crept through the hall on the way to the front of the building. She stood behind a column waiting for Mike. She felt like she needed to hide herself. She didn't know why.

She saw Mike enter the building and left her hiding place.

"I feel like I need to leave," she whispered to Mike. The raised ceiling of the atrium made her voice echo so she tried to be as quiet as possible. "I don't feel safe. Something is wrong."

Mike understood. Without a word he put his own beanie on her head, careful to make sure her slightly wavy chestnut hair still poked out of it. She was afraid of her childhood captors coming for her again. The last time they had seen her she'd barely had any hair at all so her current hair would be a drastic contrast. And she was wearing her glasses, also something they didn't know. Mike just wanted to take any measures necessary and also wanted her to know that making her feel safe was important to him.

He led her down the corridor, to a different exit than the door he'd just entered. It was closer to where he'd parked that morning. While they were in the car, El had an idea.

"I don't know why I didn't think of it before."

“Think of what?” Mike asked, pulling into a parking spot at their apartment.

“I can find people. In my head. I should just look for the bad men and see where they are. I can see if I’m worrying for nothing or if I need to leave again.”

Mike had known she could do other things and she had mentioned something in her journal about being able to find someone or hear what they were saying but he had never asked her to elaborate on that.

“Can I watch you do it?” Mike took El’s bag from her and hung their jackets up as they entered the apartment.

“Sure. You just have to be quiet. Can you find some static on the tv? I know with cable it might be harder. I kind of need it though.”

El found the tie for Mike’s bathrobe to use as a blindfold and sat on the floor in front of the television waiting for Mike to find static. He wound up producing it by switching the cable signal to the wrong one. El had what she needed. She tied the blindfold around her head and got very quiet.

Mike watched her. It didn’t look like she was doing anything but he could see her face contorting slightly, like she wasn’t sure where she was going or like she was slightly afraid.

El searched for the man whom she’d been told to call Papa. It took her a few minutes but he finally came into view. He was older but he still had the same calm yet cold demeanor. He was standing in a control room giving instructions to some people, but she could only see Papa. El didn’t recognize the room from the meager surroundings her vision showed her. She scanned all she could see and noticed a sign on the wall next to him which read *SNL: Snohomish National Laboratory*. So Papa was in Washington. She listened to what he was saying.

*Send out information to every college campus near here stating that we*

*are looking for participants for a study about mind altering medications, but indicate that it's a couples study so single people need not apply. We want to ignite the mind and then pass on the fire to the offspring. We've done it before so we can do it again.*

El had heard enough. She ripped the blindfold off. Her eyes looked red and had tears in them.

"What?" Mike asked, concerned about her sudden disquiet.

"He's not here. He's in Washington. In Snohomish. Mike, he's going to do another study on college kids but he's only allowing couples to participate. He's *trying* to make it happen again. *He's trying* to make some baby into a weapon. I was an accident, my mother didn't know she was pregnant but now he knows what can happen and he's going to do it again. Maybe he'll take more than one baby! I can't let that happen." She buried her face in her hands. Mike moved to the floor with her, hugging her against him while she cried.

"Is it a government thing? A lot has changed since you were born. Maybe it's more of a covert lab now." Mike thought aloud.

"I don't know. It was the same as in Hawkins, the sign, but said Snohomish instead. But it didn't say U.S. Department of Energy."

"Then I think we need to do some research on Snohomish National Laboratory. Tomorrow. You've done enough for today." Mike stood up and helped El up as well, both of them then flopping down together on the sofa.

"So do you think the feeling you got was because of that? He's all the way in Washington and has probably been planning a new study for months. Why would that give you the weird feeling and why would it be so strong today?" Mike asked. They were lying together on the sofa, El's head against the base of his neck. He absentmindedly played with her hair.

"I had a dream last night about being in the lab. I could barely remember it when I woke up but then in class today the professor was talking about sensory deprivation and it made me remember. I

was the age I am now but everything that was happening was the same as when I was little. The tank, his calm voice telling me to do things that scared me, how he let them punish me when I failed. It was like I'd never left. I could see him looking at me. It was so real. I think when I woke up I went ahead and tried to forget it, and I guess I did for most of the day. But once I thought about it, the memories came rushing back and I felt like I needed to leave. I was afraid he was coming for me. I even hid behind a column while I waited for you today."

"Do you still have that same feeling as at school?"

El thought about it. She searched her feelings and found that she felt a lot better. She didn't have the same sense of dread.

"I'm not feeling it now. Before the shooting though, I'd never had it. I think it's new. Maybe it's still being refined. I don't understand it, Mike. I don't have the answers. I fear what will happen in the future if my mind keeps unlocking new ways to make me feel different. What if I turn invisible? What if I develop telepathy? I know it sounds cool in the comics but it's not really cool when it's happening to me."

Mike massaged her head gently as he listened to her voice her worries. "Promise me that you'll always tell me if you feel it again. I want to know what you're going through, whatever it is." Mike shifted his head to see her better. She also lifted hers.

"I promise. Thank you for not letting me feel alone."

Mike knew that the next day he would find any information he could about the lab in Washington. If he found anything promising he'd hand it off to El so she could work her computer magic and see what more she could find. He didn't want her doing it all herself and worrying about everything so he was going to do all of the legwork and leave the fine details to her. But that was tomorrow. Tonight he only wanted to snuggle with her and give her any support she needed.

"Um, I was thinking," Mike and El had been kissing on the sofa and

before it got too heavy he had something to ask her. “I know you like having your own room but do you want to start sleeping in my bed with me every night? I think I sleep better when you’re next to me.”

El had wanted that for a long time. She did sleep with him a lot of nights but she always told herself that it wasn’t what he wanted or that she had her own room and should sleep there. She never let herself believe that every night was what he wanted. She loved lying next to him and feeling his body heat and how he would hold her while she fell asleep. Now that their relationship had progressed, adding another level, something she still couldn’t believe was so amazing and so easy and so *right*, she wanted to stay with him all the time. She was gazing at him, thinking her thoughts about him, when she realized she hadn’t yet given him an answer.

“That’s exactly what I want. I want to sleep with you every night. It’s my favorite. I have fewer nightmares when I sleep with you.”

“Do you have them a lot?” Mike asked softly. El noticed how warm his eyes looked in the glow of the lamp and how they bore straight into her own.

“I used to have them all the time. They ebb and flow. For a while I didn’t have any and then they started again. When I sleep next to you I almost never have them. But if we’re going to start researching Papa’s lab and his new study I’m sure they’ll get worse.”

“You don’t have to call him that, you know. I know he’s not really your father. It sickens me that he had you call him that when you were a kid, that he was all you had. I wish I could make up for everything you’ve lost.” Mike looked sad, staring at her, imagining again how lonely her childhood was.

“I’m not lonely anymore. You fixed that part.” El leaned in closer to him, her lips ghosting over his before the kiss got desperate. She had discovered that when she was kissing Mike all of her problems faded into oblivion and for those moments she felt like her life was perfect.



“No nightmares tonight,” Mike breathed in staccato, speaking as their mouths would part slightly before diving back in to one another. “Do you want to go to bed now?”

El looked up, momentarily ceasing her kissing assault on his neck. Their smirks almost matched as she nodded.

There were no nightmares that night. Once they finally slept, El was too tired to dream. She sank into Mike’s side comfortably and slept soundly. She knew that their upcoming dig to seek answers about the new lab she’d found would be stressful but somehow with Mike next to her it didn’t seem like something that couldn’t be accomplished. She felt like maybe she was *supposed* to try to stop it, and that Mike was her partner in it. They would watch out for each other, and support each other, and that was more than Eleven had ever thought she’d have. Everything else they had together was something she knew she would never take for granted. Mike was gold, and as one of her favorite authors had put it, *gold don’t come off*.

### Notes for the Chapter:

I don't think this is very good. I like some things here and there but overall I'm not impressed. I think I bit off more than I can chew but I'm going to try to swallow it. It may take me a little while but I will think of some way to make this be a better story. Thanks for reading. Big thanks to Joe Hill for the "gold don't come off" line. He's one of the good ones.

## 10. Chapter 10

Studying science had always been something Mike Wheeler wanted to pursue. From a young age he developed a curiosity and his curiosity led to him devouring any science related material he could find. When he stumbled upon comics at the age of 7 or 8 he fell in love with the X-Men and imagined what it would be like to have just a minimal amount of the power held by Professor X. As he got older and more into science he could understand why the mutants distrusted the government due to scientific testing on them to harness their powers for military use or to try to see how they worked. He learned about the real CIA Mind Control Program that had been done, using drugs to try to manipulate the minds of test subjects, trying to develop drugs for the use of interrogations and means of mind control. It had ultimately been halted when its illegal tactics were brought to light.

He never imagined, however, that he'd meet someone who actually had psionic abilities. When he'd discovered El's secret he knew she was telekinetic but as their relationship grew he began to notice things about her that he had yet to mention, things that he wanted to be sure of before he tested his hypothesis.

For example, the day after he had told her that he loved her she had been extra affectionate, like she couldn't contain her happiness. Mike had gone upstairs at his parents' house and El had stayed in the basement, knowing he was coming right back. He closed the door to the refrigerator and turned around and for a split second he saw a jack-o-lantern with a happy face sitting on the floor of his mother's kitchen. He rubbed his eyes and it was gone. When he got back downstairs El smiled and told him she'd been thinking about the night he first hugged her, which was on Halloween. Mike had shrugged it off as coincidence.

Her emotions had been high once more when they spent New Year's with Mike's friends, El having never experienced such a thing, the fireworks and laughter and dancing and general camaraderie. Then she started having the weird premonition type feelings. When the shooting happened her emotions had dipped the other way, the stress

of stopping the shooter and her worry over being exposed wearing on her nerves. A few days later Mike was in the kitchen when he felt something strange in his head, like a wave or a pulse, and all he could think was *El wants something to drink*. He could see her in his mind, could see her asking him to bring her something. He felt warm and happy. Then the feeling was gone. He grabbed a soda and went to the living room, where El was reading. She didn't say anything but she looked pleased when he handed her the drink.

The more he thought about it the more sense it made. He had read about diseases that could lie dormant in someone's body until something triggered them to emerge. He was beginning to think that maybe El had powers that also lay dormant inside her but that now emotions being so strong, whether high or low, were causing different abilities to show themselves. He wasn't even sure if she was aware of it.

He wanted to talk to her about it. He wanted to know more and to see for himself if telepathy was something she was capable of or if he'd made it all up. He was worried though that the scientific part of him might make him seem like the bad men from the lab, wanting to test her to see what her limits were. Mike would never forgive himself if he made her think he was anything like them. He wanted to be her partner, the person she most trusted. He decided he would just tell her everything he'd been thinking.

Mike was researching Snohomish National Laboratory and cross referencing the name Martin Brenner while El was taking a shower. He had found some information but was still in the early stages of formulating a possible plan for what to do about El's quest. He was jotting down some notes when his mind felt fuzzy again and then warm, followed by El's face. Mike's only thought was *new razor*. He was about to go find one for her when he decided to try something else.

Mike concentrated and sent out his thought. *Just use mine. It's next to the sink.*

He waited but didn't feel the warm, fuzzy feeling in his brain anymore so he wasn't sure if what he'd done had worked or if she'd

just given up and decided not to shave her legs.

When El appeared, freshly showered and dressed, smelling like honeysuckle, she settled next to Mike on the sofa where he was doing his research.

“Um, did you find my razor?” Mike asked, watching her face for her reaction. He wasn’t disappointed, as she looked surprised.

“How did you know I needed one?” Her voice was soft, surprise still evident, *astonished* might be the word Mike would use to describe it.

Mike set his computer and notes on the coffee table so that he could pivot on the sofa to face her. She was already facing him, her legs tucked underneath her the way she liked to sit. She always made herself smaller, Mike had noticed.

“I think that you might be more than telekinetic. Have you noticed any other things you can do? Because I think I have. I think you may have psionic powers. I use that term because I’m a nerd who is into D&D and comics but it’s also like, exactly the definition of what I think you might be capable of doing.”

“What do you mean, *other things*?” El asked, her eyes searching Mike’s for the possibility that he might be kidding.

“Well I think you can make things appear that aren’t there. Like when we were home for Christmas, I was upstairs in the kitchen and you were in the basement and I turned around and there was a jack-o-lantern on the floor with a happy face carved into it. It was glowing and everything. I couldn’t believe it so I rubbed my eyes and when I looked again it was gone. Then when I got back downstairs you told me that you’d been thinking about the first time I hugged you. Halloween. I didn’t really think anything of it. But then after the fun we had at New Year’s you started having those feelings of like, the bad premonitions or whatever they were and then after the school massacre, after you’d been so stressed, I noticed that I was occasionally getting mental telegrams, for lack of a better word, from you. Just feelings accompanied by pictures or specific thoughts that I knew weren’t mine. I think you’re telepathic.”

El stared at him, still not really believing him, but she was thinking about everything he said. Mike reached out and took her hands in his.

“When you were in the shower I felt the fuzzy feeling in my head again, and it’s really kind of an awesome feeling, it feels warm and happy and kind of like a brain hug I guess. Anyway my thought was just that you needed a razor. I already had my suspicions so I wanted to see if you could read my thoughts. So I told you to use mine. I concentrated on it. And you did use it, right?”

El nodded slowly.

“I think the abilities were always there but you’re not a kid anymore and I think emotional highs and lows have awakened them from dormancy. There could even be more that come out. But I’m here for you, whatever happens.” Mike kissed her hand.

“I made a jack-o-lantern appear? You actually saw it?” El asked.

“I swear. And then it was just gone.”

“I *do* remember thinking about you hugging me. I was thinking about how happy it made me and about Halloween. I wasn’t trying to make anything happen though.”

“I wonder what would happen if you practiced. You’d probably get better at everything, get stronger. It could come in really handy when we go to Washington to take down this maniac.” Mike nodded toward his computer and notes.

El’s mouth dropped open a bit. She hadn’t expected for Mike to take on her crusade with so much seriousness.

“We’re going?” She asked, squeezing Mike’s hands.

“We’ll have to wait until spring break but we’re definitely going. We’re going to stop him so you never have to worry about him anymore. So we have a little over a month for you to get stronger. I

will help you. You can test everything out on me. Now that you know you can do things with your mind I think it's just a matter of you trying different tactics to see what works. You can read my X-Men comics if you think it would help. I know it's not real but it might give you some ideas."

"I wouldn't want to hurt you though." El looked down. Mike lifted her chin with his finger.

"You won't hurt me. I just want to help you refine your gifts. I think it will be amazing." Mike grinned at her and pulled her against him. The scent of honeysuckle drifted into his nostrils and he inhaled deeper. El's head was comfortably situated against his neck, her face at a slightly upward tilt. Mike could feel her lips against his skin. A minute later he felt what he now could name, what he now knew was a thought from El.

*I love you.*

"See?" Mike whispered as he hugged her. "It's working already. I love you too."

Between school and homework, Mike and El spent all of their free time honing her skills. Mike had admitted his fear that he would make her feel like an experiment again as he gave her tasks to try to accomplish but she calmed his fears, telling him that he was helping, that she *needed* him and that he never made her feel like she'd felt as a child. She always felt safe with him.

At first he would make lists of small things that she could try to make him see. She could only muster the objects to stay for a few seconds in the beginning but as her skills got sharper she could make the illusions last longer. She caused him to see a gray cat sleeping on the foot of the bed. He could even hear it purring. When he reached to pet it his hand swept through air. El giggled.

They also practiced her straight telepathy. She was getting much better at an exponential rate. Instead of just feeling warm and fuzzy and having mental images Mike was now hearing sentences, hearing

El's actual voice in his head. He could always send messages back to her but unless she told him she heard him he had no way of really knowing. It bothered him slightly but it wasn't El's fault that she could do such things, and it wasn't Mike's fault that he couldn't. She of course sensed his minor irritation and promised him, telepathically, that she would always respond to him so he would know that she heard him.

"Let me know if you feel tired." Mike and El were at the supermarket. Mike thought it would be a good idea for El to practice hearing other people's thoughts instead of just his. He figured the grocery store would be a benign enough place, knowing that El didn't like to intrude on the personal matters of unsuspecting people. It would be helpful when they went to the lab though, so she needed to know how to do it. She needed to know if she could differentiate between several people at once.

Standing in the produce section, El and Mike were surrounded by six different people, one being a young child sitting in his mother's buggy. El concentrated on each one independently, focusing on their thoughts. Mike could see from her expression that it was working. He could see that she was reading their minds. It took all of his effort to not jump up and down in the store. El pulled him close enough to her to speak quietly.

"The lady there is looking for a perfectly ripe tomato. Her husband is starting to get annoyed. He thinks they all look fine." She pointed to an elderly couple standing next to a bin of tomatoes. "That guy there doesn't know what garbanzo beans are. He's really confused." She gestured to a man around their age who was looking back and forth between a list he held in his hand and the fresh green beans. Mike snickered, the man was clearly in the wrong section of the store. El gently slapped his arm. "Be nice, we're not supposed to know he's confused." Mike nodded solemnly. El went on, "the lady there that looks to be your mom's age just remembered that her daughter is bringing a date to dinner tonight so she wants to get something for dessert before she leaves the store." Mike saw the woman El was referring to, her cart almost full. Then El turned toward a girl about their age who had a small child sitting in the front of the buggy. "And *she* wishes that she didn't have the baby tonight. She wishes

she could go out with her friends.”

Mike was so impressed. El’s nose was not bleeding, she didn’t seem at all tired. He wanted to pick her up and spin in circles but he held back, not wanting to cause a scene. El grabbed his hand and headed out of the produce section, making sure to walk past the man in front of the green beans.

“No, Mike, we still have to get garbanzo beans and they’re in the dried bean section, with the canned stuff,” she said loud enough for the confused man to hear. Mike smiled radiantly, loving how good and helpful El was at heart.

Back at home they celebrated El’s accomplishment with some sparkling wine Mike had bought for Valentine’s Day, which was just a few days away. El had come so far so quickly though, he wanted to acknowledge her and he knew he could always get more. He knew El liked the fizziness of it and he liked how she got even sweeter and was more open when she’d had a few drinks.

They sat on the sofa, the opened bottle on the coffee table.

“Mike, are you sure you don’t think differently about me now that I have all of these other powers?” El set her glass down and Mike could see that she seemed suddenly worried.

“Would you think differently of me if our roles were reversed? If *my* mind was the most powerful thing you’d ever witnessed? Would you think differently of me if I was a *hero*?” Mike asked, scooting closer to her.

El leaned into him. “You *are* a hero. To me.” Her arms snuck around his waist and she could hear his heart beat slightly faster.

“I don’t think differently of you, El. If anything I love you more. But not because of what you can do, I love you because of who you are. I love getting to be here with you as you discover new things about yourself. I love that you count on me, that you trust me. I love how smart you are, how you’re willing to try even if you might be scared. What you can do is so awesome, don’t get me wrong, you’re so



amazing, but I was already starting to fall for you before I knew anything about that. *You* are what I want. All the other things are just bonuses.”

El sighed. Hearing Mike talk about her always made her feel tingly, the way he sounded so passionate he could just as easily be talking about his favorite book or comic but she knew he was talking about *her* and it made her heart swell.

“Since when do we keep sparkling wine in our kitchen?” El asked. She was on her second drink.

“It was for Valentine’s Day but I thought we deserved it. You deserved it. So we’re drinking it.”

“Did you have big plans?” El sat up, looking at Mike, one brow raised.

“Maybe. It’s not Valentine’s Day yet so I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

“Will I?” She was smirking now.

“Well, shit,” Mike grinned, remembering that she could read his mind. “Have at it, my love. My mind is yours.”

El blushed four shades of red.

Anywhere she went, El practiced her new gifts, as long as it didn’t look like people were having private conversations. She only wanted to practice so she could take down Brenner, she didn’t love the idea of commandeering the minds of fellow students but it was something Mike had mentioned that she might try. Maybe during a lecture class or when someone looked bored.

She had heard the thoughts of several people while she was in class, marveling at how she could hear them as though they were sitting next to her and still concentrate on what the professor was saying. She could write or read and still control which students she wanted

to hear. Her next step was seeing if she could make them do things.

The first time she tried it felt the same as reading their minds only she focused a little more so that the communication was two ways. She found that it only worked if it was someone who was sitting near her. She couldn't reach the people at the front of the auditorium. She made the guy sitting next to her break his pencil in half. Then she made the girl in front of him turn around and blow a kiss in his direction. It was enough for her. She really wanted to show Mike.

Class was finally over and she practically ran to meet up with Mike, thinking at him the entire way.

*Let me know as soon as you hear me. I'm on my way. I can't wait to tell you what I did.*

She kept going, sending the same message until she heard Mike think back at her. On the third attempt he did. She could see him but was still probably thirty yards away from him.

*I'm here. El, this is so cool.*

El remembered her promise, also noticing that he still didn't see her coming toward him.

*I hear you. I see you too.*

Mike looked up. El was only ten feet away from him, wearing the most radiant smile. She really looked happy. It took Mike's breath away slightly.

"What are you so happy about?" He bent down to kiss her. He hadn't seen her since the morning.

El looked around the area where they had met. Students were walking down the sidewalk in both directions on the tree lined street in front of the biology buildings. She noticed a group of three young men laughing together as they walked.

"Watch the guy on the right," she casually pointed at her target.

“Want him to kiss the one in the middle on the cheek?” She smiled so brightly that Mike could only nod.

He watched as she directed her attention to the boys and then just as she’d said, the guy on the right pulled the middle guy closer to him and kissed his cheek. The guy in the middle shoved him off and then the one who had been on the left laughed out loud at the two of them.

“You did that? El, that’s like, such a huge accomplishment. Do you realize how much that will help us?”

“I do. That’s why I’m so happy.” El held Mike’s hand as they walked to his car.

She told him about the other things she’d done that day, how she could multitask mind reading and her schoolwork without a problem, what she’d made the students do in class. She wanted to try something bigger but didn’t want to break any laws or hurt anyone.

At home that night, Mike told her she could just use him. She could try anything she needed to try. Since *she* was the telepath she should be able to make him hear or *not* hear anything she chose. She should be able to make him see anything, or *not* see anything. She could test out any form of distraction on him and then she would know what she could or couldn’t do.

She started small and didn’t tell him when she was doing anything, or what she was doing. They sat watching television and El focused on Mike’s mind.

“I’ll get it.” Mike got up to answer the door, having heard someone knock. El put her hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

“Okay, one point for you.” Mike winked at El before sitting back down.

Then she made him vacuum the rug. She let him come back to himself just before he had finished, watching his confusion before realization dawned on him.

“That’s two.” El smiled rather seductively and then went back to watching television.

El was having fun, if she was being honest with herself. She was learning how to control this new aspect of herself and while she knew that she would most likely have to use it soon in ways that would make her smile far less, she was feeling more confident about her chances. Tonight she wanted to see how well she could use her new skills in more fun and creative ways.

“Mike, do you want to dance?” She asked him. She looked at him so lovingly he could never say no.

“Um, sure, but I’ll have to find some music.” Mike started to turn the television to a music station. El turned the tv off with her mind.

“We don’t need it.” She stood up, pulling Mike with her. Her arms went around his neck and his hands gripped her waist, pulling her even closer. “Can you hear it?”

Mike could hear it. The tv was off. His stereo was in his bedroom. The music was coming from the living room, though he couldn’t pin point the source. All he knew for sure was that he was dancing slowly with El in his arms and listening to the lulling chords of *Sweet Jane*.

“I like this song a lot.” El let her head fall onto his chest as they swayed. “I had never heard it before you sang it to me and now it’s one of my favorites.”

“I found out some things about Brenner,” Mike said. He was rubbing slow circles on her back. She could feel the warmth of his hands.

“Not tonight. We can talk about him tomorrow. I just want to think about us tonight. Is that okay?” El asked, squeezing him tighter. She then pulled back enough to look at him.

Mike looked into her eyes, her slight smile beckoning him, and then kissed her gently. Spring break was quickly approaching, they would

be talking about Brenner soon enough. Mike knew El was right, he knew they needed to just focus on each other.

“Tell me what I’m thinking, El.”

El focused on him and then smiled shyly, nodding her head.

“Okay. I like it when you carry me too.”

Mike picked her up and carried her down the hall to the bedroom. The music didn’t stop until the song was over. Then El’s mind was focused on other things. As they made love she let Mike hear her inner thoughts and he opened his mind to her, wanting to share everything. The resultant closeness was something that they would need to tap into at a later date, but for the time being it served to, as the kids would say, *rock their world*.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I was feeling very down about this story but I had some feedback that made me feel better and I decided to give her powers she doesn’t currently have in canon. The El in this story is older though so maybe she’ll get some more powers canonically with time. She’ll need the extra pizzazz when they go to Washington, which will be pretty soon. I greatly appreciate your comments and feedback and I hope the story is likeable. I like it, but it’s like, you write something and then post it and it’s out there and then the feelings of insecurity start because you just know that you’ll feel awful if anyone tells you they don’t like it, even though you wrote it for your own enjoyment. The internet can be a harsh and cold place and while I haven’t experienced that side yet in the realm of fanfiction I know it’s always a possibility. So thank you so much for reading and letting me know if you like it. In the end it’s all about Mike and Eleven but I want to throw some action and danger in as well. I’d be happy if season 3 was 8 episodes of them sitting on the couch snuggling but I

know that won't be the case. So I try to follow suit and have some sort of antagonist, though I'm not awesome at that sort of thing. But anyway, thanks again to my readers.

## 11. Chapter 11

El knelt on the floor of their darkened living room, her eyes closed. Her ability to locate and listen to anyone was stronger than it ever had been, the practice with her new powers causing the ones she'd always had to increase in intensity. She had been keeping track of the progression of Brenner's study with almost obsessive interest. In her mind she could see Brenner lecturing the details of the first phase of his plan.

*Once we have selected the six sets of couples we can move forward. Superior intellect is a must for the first group. Those who score high enough on the qualifying exam and who also meet the health requirements will be our focus. If we happen to have more sets of couples who meet the standards they will be eligible to enter our second batch of subjects. Candidates that do not meet the requirements will be told that they will be eligible for the second study, where we will compare with our first results. There is a chance that intellect in the parents doesn't matter for the outcome I'm trying to achieve but I want to see what happens with each group.*

El was getting a better idea of how she was going to take Brenner down, she just wasn't sure Mike would love her scheme.

During his research Mike had discovered that the only government science lab in Washington was the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, located in Richland, Washington, far away from Snohomish. He had also researched the Hawkins National Laboratory and had learned that Dr. Martin Brenner was no longer affiliated with that particular lab nor was he associated with any United States Government science industries. Apparently there was some mishap at the Hawkins lab ten years earlier that had caused Brenner to lose his job and government security clearance.

*So he went rogue*, Mike had thought to himself, knowing that the mishap in question was one highly intelligent, telekinetic little girl having escaped under Brenner's watch.

Mike knew that they would need identification in case they did make it into the lab. Even not being associated with the government, the

organization would have security measures. He knew they shouldn't use their real names. He had been thinking that they could take a tour of the place. He didn't know what El might do once they were inside. He hadn't wanted to use her powers in any untoward ways but once he explained, El had no problem with Mike's reasoning. Two weeks prior they had gone to the Chicago Department of Motor Vehicles and El had used her mind to get new identification for both of them. She wore her wig and glasses. Mike was a little stunned when she had walked out of her room all dressed to go. He hadn't seen her wearing the wig. *You look pretty* was all he could say.

El stepped up to the clerk behind the counter and Mike watched as the clerk started entering information into a computer. He was standing just behind El and could see that the clerk was entering the names he had made up for them, doing both of their input at once. Another clerk made an annoyed huff.

"The security cameras are all on the fritz. I don't know what happened." He got up to investigate as the lady under El's control continued to type information into the computer. Mike knew what had happened. El just looked at the clerk helping her, giving no indications that anything was amiss.

At home Mike had told El that the names he made up would make them think of their friends and maybe give them an extra boost of confidence when they became those people, which made El's heart swell, knowing how thoughtful he always was, even when the situation could be dangerous. After a few more keystrokes the clerk, in a rather monotone voice, told them both to step down to the opposite end of the counter to have their pictures taken for the driver's license cards. They did as they were told and in a matter of minutes they were moved to the front of the line. Mike knew El had made it happen. Once their new licenses were finished they had gone to a coffee shop around the corner, needing to warm up a bit from the Chicago cold. They had compared their new selves.

"Mike, these names are great. You're so creative." El smiled, looking down at the very real licenses with the very fake names.

"I wanted them to be with us. Maybe someday we'll tell them."



El took Mike's hand. "If we succeed in doing this, we will definitely tell them. I promise."

That had been two weeks ago. Now he was in his room, knowing that El was in the place where she could find people, *the void*, she called it, and he'd wanted to give her space and privacy. Mike was contemplating Brenner. What kind of scientist must he be to want to turn children into weapons? He wasn't even part of the government anymore. What were his plans if he was successful? He'd done it before, El was proof of that, but it hadn't been planned. What was he willing to do to make it happen again? What would happen if he failed? Who would he blame? The questions pelted Mike's mind.

Sitting on the bed, his back to the door, Mike didn't hear El enter the room. He wasn't aware of her presence until she was standing right in front of him. He'd had his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, looking at the floor. He lifted his head and she pushed his hair away from his face.

"Did you find out anything new?" Mike asked. He could tell from her expression that she had something on her mind. He pulled her closer to him. When he was sitting on the bed they were almost the same height. She wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed.

"I have an idea. I don't know if you're going to like it though." El's voice was quiet, as though she feared rejection.

Mike was a bit skeptical but he wanted to hear her plan. He moved backwards to the headboard, pulling El with him. She cuddled against his side, the position one of her most favorite and most comforting places to be. Mike ran his fingers through her hair.

"Tell me."

El began with what she'd heard Brenner say when she was in the void, telling him about the original group needing to meet intellectual standards. Mike listened as she repeated everything she'd heard.

"Mike? I think we should try to be in the study." Her words were almost whispered.

"El, do you realize how risky that would be for you? What if he recognizes you? I thought we'd just ask for a tour." Mike was already worrying about losing her.

"I'll disguise myself. It's been ten years. Surely I'm different now than I was then. I'll wear my wig and obviously I'll wear my glasses."

"The lab isn't affiliated with the government in any way," Mike explained. "I'm not sure how many people work there but the town is small and since he's running a rather covert operation I would think he might be using a skeleton crew. I'm pretty unsure about this but I'll support any ideas you have. I can call and see about maybe getting a tour while we're there during spring break. I can say we're science majors and are interested in working in a lab after college. Maybe I can find out how to be in the study."

"You'd do that?"

"El, I'd do anything for you. I want to stop him too. I don't want you to ever have to think about him again. I don't like that you might come into contact with him, that sickens me, but if it means he'll be out of your life for good then I will do whatever needs to be done." Mike spoke softly, still combing his fingers through her hair. It sent tingles down El's spine. "Do you think you could find out when they'll be starting? You'd said he wanted college students to know about it. I hope they haven't already filled the slots."

"I can try. I'll be back." El moved away from Mike, going into her bedroom. Being so close to him, hearing his heart beat, put too many thoughts of love in her mind and she needed to be sharp to focus on her task. She closed her eyes and searched once more for her nemesis. In a short time she saw him, sitting behind a desk. She could see papers scattered across it, as though he had been furiously working on something. She walked around the desk so that she had a better view. He was making a test. The papers scattered about, once El could see better, were from a file with her name on it, or 011 anyway. She saw a picture of herself. She looked so small, like maybe 6 years old. She noted that the Brenner she'd known in the past had been meticulous and never allowed anything to be messy. The Brenner she was now seeing looked frazzled, his desk jumbled with books and papers, notes scribbled on some. He had a computer but

kept going back to the papers from the file.

*I can do even better this time. Eleven was nothing compared to what I will do next.*

He was muttering to himself when El heard another person enter the room. Unlike before, she could see the person. It was a man in a lab coat. Brenner looked up, clearly expecting the visitor. He spoke to him.

*It's complete. You can start accepting applicants. Since we're such a small operation we'll have to start with the University of Washington. I know there are some quite excellent schools near here that have received our original minor briefing about our project but I don't imagine that the religiously based ones will have many students who are interested in what we're doing. Make sure it seems as though we will be studying the effects of how these drugs affect the limbic system, that we're hoping to develop a way that couples can communicate to one another without words. They will not know what our underlying mission is. The information we have already released to local schools was vague. I only want those with legitimate interest to know more details.*

El watched as the man nodded in agreement with Brenner. He was then handed a large letter sized envelope.

*The test packet is in this. Make copies so we're ready when the applicants arrive. Has much interest been shown?*

Brenner was looking expectantly at the man.

*We've had several calls inquiring about the study. We turned away a few single people but now that the test is ready we can explore the other callers. Their information was taken so we have them on file. We can start the administration as soon as you are happy with the candidates.*

El knew it would be happening soon. She didn't have a lot of time. She returned to Mike's room.

"It's soon, Mike. They've made a written test for people to take, to see if they meet the requirements, and they can start as soon as Brenner is pleased with the participants. We'll be there next week. I hope it's

not too late." El was pacing the floor. Mike frowned at her worry. He opened the drawer of his nightstand and removed a phone El had never seen.

"It's a burner phone. Cheap. It's not traced to me in any way. I picked it up so we could call places while we're in Washington without leaving a trail of ourselves." Mike had already gotten the phone number for Brenner's private lab, finding it under the list of outside contractors used occasionally by Boeing, though it looked like they had only used Brenner once.

El listened quietly as Mike made contact with the lab she wanted to destroy. She watched him talk animatedly as he told the person on the other end about a friend of his mentioning the study to him, about how he and his girlfriend were interested but they attended the University of Chicago and couldn't get to Washington until their spring break, which didn't start for another week. He told them that they were both studying science and wanted be involved in the process, his girlfriend especially, since she hoped to create pharmaceutical medications someday. There was a pause, as though he was listening to the other person speaking, and then El's heart sped up as Mike looked up at her, smiling triumphantly and nodding.

"Sure, let me give you some of my information so if you need to contact me before then you can," Mike was saying. "My name is Dustin Sinclair." There was a short pause on Mike's end. "Oh, her name is Willa Mayfield. We're very much looking forward to being part of the study."

He gave the number that went with his untraceable phone along with an email address he had created just for the purpose of interacting with the lab, not wanting to give any of his own personal information. He thanked them again before he ended the call. He turned back to El.

"We're in. We just have to show up to take the test but they said they'll score them immediately so we'll know if we can take part while we're still there." From where she stood it looked to El like Mike was shaking.

El was suddenly very scared. The plan was in motion. Mike sensed

her thoughts, her emotional response causing her to seek him involuntarily. They held each other.

"We're really doing this," Mike heard El say. She didn't sound confident. He had felt shaky when he had gotten off the phone, the reality of what they were about to do setting in, but hearing El's voice sound so frightened triggered his protective side.

"You are the most powerful person in the world. I think that's the truth. It's *my* truth. You can do anything you set your mind to do, and you have the best mind. You can do this, El. You can make him pay for what he took from you."

"I don't want to kill anyone, Mike. I've done enough of that." El still sounded scared but had melted more into Mike, relaxing into his embrace.

"I know. Maybe it won't come to that. El, you can make them do whatever you want them to do. You will be the one in control. Please don't ever forget that. You are more than capable of taking him down while keeping everyone safe. You are *amazing*. But if you *do* have to get violent, know that I understand and I'll still love you and I'll always support you. If that has to happen, I'll know it's because there was no other way."

El looked up at him then. He was always so sincere and his sincerity touched her soul. He had a way of looking at her that made her feel divine.

*Please kiss me.*

Mike received her message. He leaned forward and their lips connected. Mike tried to take away her fears and doubts, thinking only of her throughout the kiss, knowing by her reactions that she was feeling his every thought. He couldn't help some of the things that went through his mind. When he thought of her he thought *forever* and the notions that go with the phrase. He didn't care though. He was fine with being completely open with her. He thought that even *forever* with El might not be long enough for him.

Suddenly he felt another message from El. They were still wrapped in

each other, standing at the foot of Mike's bed.

*Forever might not be long enough for me either.*

A week later, Mike and El found themselves picking up their rental car in Seattle. It was raining but was warmer than Chicago, so not a bad trade. Mike tried to lighten the mood by telling El that the *rain in Spain stays mainly in Seattle* but she was feeling apprehensive. Once they had their car they were going straight to the lab. El had used the mirror in the sun visor to adjust her blonde wig.

El was quiet in the car. Mike knew that she was psyching herself up, he was doing the same. He felt like once they had completed the test they would get more information. He really had no idea what they would be told, what they would be given, if it even got to that point.

The drive took less than an hour, even in the rain. As they entered the building El noted that it was smaller than she had anticipated, but the smell, the clinical, antiseptic smell of her childhood, invaded her nostrils and she instantly felt again like her 12-year-old self. She gripped Mike's hand, her knuckles turning white.

*You can do this. Please hear me.*

Mike tried to calm her with his thoughts, hoping that she was listening. She squeezed his hand again.

*Thank you.*

They were greeted by a receptionist. Mike did most of the talking.

"Hi! I called last week about participating in a couples study that's being done here. My friend from UW told me about it. We're at the University of Chicago though so since we're on spring break this is all the time we have," Mike explained, not knowing if the person he was now speaking with was the same person he'd spoken to on the phone.

"Yes, sir. I remember speaking to you last week. You're the budding scientists who would like to see what it's like being on the specimen side." She laughed lightly.

"Right. If I remember correctly there's a test we need to take? Could we do that?"

"Certainly. I'll just need to make copies of your identification and then you both can go into the room on the left. It's a Scantron test so just fill in the bubbles and then I'll have it scored while you wait. If you qualify you'll be told more about the study."

Mike and El both handed her their fake identification. She made copies of both and then handed them each a test packet and a #2 pencil.

"Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Mayfield, good luck to you." She smiled brightly at them. It all felt so ordinary.

The questions on the test might seem hard for average people but El was finished with hers in no time at all. Mike finished not long after. It had mostly been math and chemistry, and Mike and El excelled in both subjects. They returned their tests to the receptionist and she disappeared down the hall with the forms, returning not long after and explaining that the scanner was in another room and someone would buzz her desk with the results.

Mike used the time to try to learn more about the lab.

"I was hoping that we could take a tour. Would that be possible?"

"We don't really give tours. We run a very small lab. Our lead researcher is a very competent man who likes to keep his work to himself, aspects of it anyway. If you qualify for the study you will get to see more areas of the facility. It shouldn't take long to get the results back."

Mike sat down next to El in the small reception area. She slid her very cold hand into his. He startled slightly a few minutes later when he heard a buzzing sound.

"Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Mayfield? You both have qualified to take part in our study. If you would kindly follow me I'll introduce you to our team and they'll tell you more about the project."

El held Mike's hand tightly as they followed the receptionist down the

corridor. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Mike could feel her fear and he tried his best to quell it. They were led into a room with twelve simple hospital beds, six on either side of the room, facing each other perfectly. There were three scientists in the room but no sign of Brenner.

"This is Dustin Sinclair and Willa Mayfield. They have just qualified for the study." The receptionist left the room after her introduction of them.

One scientist regarded Mike and El. It made Mike feel slightly uneasy.

"You two have the highest scores of anyone who has taken the test. You're lucky because we needed one more couple. Otherwise you would have to wait until round two. I'm Dr. Flagg and this is Dr. Barlow. We'll be administering the medications while Mr. Gray here takes notes."

"So you're the lead in this study? I'm only asking because we both want to do what you do someday," Mike pried. He knew Brenner would appear at some point during this whole ordeal.

"Dr. Brenner is the lead. It's his study. We are simply his team. You'll meet him soon enough."

"Can you tell us more about what we might encounter in this study? What will happen to us?" El spoke for the first time.

"You will be given a series of pills, I can't tell you what the names are for security reasons, but we are suspecting that the cocktail will induce psychoactive results. Our goal is to develop a medication that allows couples to speak to each other telepathically but there are other possibilities. We want to see what happens when we entertain the limbic system."

"Why do you need couples? If it works wouldn't any one person be able to talk with any other person?" Mike asked.

Mr. Barlow answered him. "We believe that couples are already linked so the medication will enhance their connection."

"When would we do this?" El asked.



"You can come back tomorrow, be here at 8:00 a.m. The other participants will join you. You'll all lie in these hospital beds and then we'll give you the medication. If you feel anything strange, or realize that you can see, hear, or do anything you couldn't do before, you will tell us. We'll keep increasing the dosage as the week progresses and then log all of our results."

Mike knew the question that needed to be asked, since no one was saying anything about it.

"Um, do we need to like, be abstinent during this week while we're on this medication? Is it safe?"

Dr. Flagg laughed. "It's perfectly safe! Please carry on with your lives as you normally would. If the cocktail works it will only affect your mind. Even if you did get pregnant, or if you already *were* pregnant, no harm would come to the baby."

El knew he was lying. She'd heard every single thought from the man since he'd introduced himself. She squeezed Mike's hand again.

"If it works, how long will the effects last?" El asked.

"Like any other medication, it would work its way through your system and then wear off over an amount of time. We'll be studying the half-life of the cocktail as well so we can better understand the dosages needed. Ultimately though, if you didn't take it regularly you would not retain any abilities that it induced."

"Okay then. I guess we'll see you tomorrow morning. How long will it take each day? Do we need to bring a lunch?" Mike asked.

"Lunch will be provided. You can expect to be here for most of the day. Please get some rest tonight so that you are ready to use your brains tomorrow. We want to see a breakthrough in clinical research! Can you imagine if we developed a drug that allowed couples to be telepathic between themselves? How much money could be made? It's astounding when you think about it. But that's *my* reasoning. Dr. Brenner is much more altruistic than I am, I'm afraid. He only wants to *help* people be closer to one another. He really is a great man."

Mike forced himself to nod at Dr. Flagg. "Well, tomorrow it is then. Thanks so much. We remember the way out."

Back at the hotel El laid out her plans. She and Mike could already talk to one another telepathically, or she could do it for the both of them. Her main concern was getting the others to want to leave the study before it started, leaving only herself and Mike.

"I feel better about it now. I feel determined. I'll make them want to study the effects on just us and when Brenner comes in I'm going to make him see something that scares him so much it drives him mad. That's my plan anyway."

"Are we going to take the cocktail?"

"We are. If they are really trying to get a special baby then the drugs they use on the parents would have to have some merit. They'd have to work somehow. I'm pretty sure my mother was already pregnant with me when she started the study she was in. I wasn't conceived by two people who had taken special mind altering medications. I do want to see what happens when my limbic system is given medication to enhance it and I want to see what you could do if you had powers. I know you'd like to know."

Mike stared at El. The fact that she could think about how to bring down this man who had robbed her of her childhood and still put Mike first, still allow him to experience things he never thought he'd encounter almost made him cry. He stood before her, removing the wig. She shook out her real hair, wavy locks falling around her face.

"You're the best thing that has ever happened to me, El. The *best*." He kissed her softly.

*I think the same about you, Mike.*

When they got to the lab the next morning El was ready. They were shown to the room with the hospital beds where they met the other participants, all couples around their age. El started her work. Mike sat back on the bed he'd been given and watched. Mr. Gray was in

the room with them but so far he hadn't seen Flagg, Barlow, or Brenner. One couple after the other excused themselves from the room. Mike heard them tell Mr. Gray that they'd had a change of heart and no longer wanted to participate. Soon only he and El were left. El was staring at Mr. Gray. He got up and left the room. A few minutes later he returned with Flagg and Barlow. El stared at them as well.

"It seems as though you two are our only test subjects. Ah, well, that will be fine. You scored the highest anyway. I'll be back soon with your first dosage of the medication." Flagg exited the room, leaving Mike and El alone with Barlow and Gray.

"Dr. Brenner will come introduce himself once you've been given the medication." Dr. Barlow said as though he was answering a question no one had asked him aloud.

Flagg returned with seven pills for each of them. He seemed a little dazed but was still acting rather competently. He handed them each a small paper cup containing their pills and another cup containing water. El looked across at Mike.

*I love you. Just take them and keep me informed of how you feel. When Brenner comes in I'll handle him.*

Mike thought back at her. *I love you too. Please be careful, El. I don't know how I'll react to these pills. Just stay in control. Do whatever you have to do.*

He swallowed the pills, first taking three and then taking the other four. He watched as El swallowed her pills as well.

The test had officially begun. There still had been no sign of Brenner. Mike was starting to feel funny, lightheaded. He had never taken illicit drugs but he imagined what he was feeling might be what some of them felt like. He was feeling euphoric.

*El, I can feel stuff. It feels weird.*

El hadn't been trying to listen to his thoughts, she was too preoccupied with the idea of Brenner walking in at any minute.

*Really? Think hard. See what else you can do. Can you make me see something? Can you make anything move?*

El loved watching how Mike's face scrunched up as he thought of something, trying to make her see a vision. She purposefully kept herself from knowing what he was thinking, wanting to see if it would work. She was feeling a bit euphoric herself. It had happened quickly for her. She was managing to stay in control.

*I don't think I can make anything move. I guess it's not really working on me.*

El looked across at Mike. He looked disappointed.

*Mike, I heard you when you said you felt weird and I wasn't trying to. You communicated that yourself. I think it is working on you. But don't tell them you feel anything.*

Mike beamed back at her.

Flagg entered again and started asking them both questions about what, if anything, they were feeling. They both denied feeling different from before they'd taken the medication. Flagg frowned.

"I'm going to give you each one more pill. It's something different. I'll check back again in thirty minutes." He had the pills with him. They were larger than the previous ones. Mike and El each took them and El braced herself. She could already feel her thoughts speed up. She'd known what Flagg was going to say before he even knew himself. She realized that the drugs were causing her to see things that hadn't happened yet, though no more than three minutes ahead.

They were left alone again.

*Mike, I can see into the future. It's just a few minutes right now though. I feel incredible, actually.*

Mike smiled at her. He loved it when she felt good about herself. He had been afraid of what the medication might do to her since she was already so powerful.

El's eyes widened suddenly, fear evident on her face. Mike sat up.

*What's wrong?*

She looked across at Mike, remembering every encouraging word he'd said to her, every kiss, everything *good* that he'd brought into her life.

*He's here.*

The door opened.

"Hello. I'm Dr. Brenner. How are we feeling today?"

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Will Brenner recognize El? Will she be able to stop him? How will these medications affect her as they work through her system? She's already feeling strong effects and she just took the pills. Let me know what you think and thanks again for reading. I'll try not to leave you hanging for long.

## 12. Chapter 12

Everything happened so quickly. When El saw Brenner she once again felt like the child she'd been when last she'd seen him, remembering the effect he'd always had on her. She had always been afraid of him, his calm voice contrasting with what he made her do. Now as she looked at him her fear turned to anger and then her anger raged. She maintained control. Her heightened abilities and her aggravated state fueled her actions. He recognized her immediately. El stood to face him.

"Eleven. After all this time, you've come home." Brenner's smile was villainous. "I have to say that I'm surprised to see you but that I'm pleased that you are once again my experiment. Your child will be most impressive, I'm sure."

While he was speaking El could also read his thoughts. *I'm not letting her get away from me again. I need to separate her from the boy.*

"You were *never* my home. *He* is my home." She gestured to Mike, who had gotten up and was standing next to El, ready to shield her if necessary, as though she wasn't the most powerful force he had ever encountered. "You took everything from me."

Brenner started to slowly walk toward her. El froze him in place with her mind, not even allowing him to speak.

Mike watched as the man stood perfectly still. El had closed her eyes. A few seconds later the other scientists arrived.

*I brought them here. I'm ending this now.* El met Mike's gaze.

"Dr. Barlow, you will retrieve all of the remaining medication that is being used for this study. Whatever there is in the laboratory, bring it to me. Mr. Gray, you will help him. This is the best idea either of you have ever had." They both nodded eagerly and disappeared down the hall.

"Dr. Flagg, you will take Mr. Sinclair to Dr. Brenner's office and help him find all of the files associated with this study. Anything

pertaining to mind alteration or your real goal of bringing about a baby with special abilities you will hand over to him. This is the only thing you've ever really wanted to do."

*Get all of his files. Anything that looks important. I love you.*

Mike followed Flagg. Flagg was whistling as they walked down the corridor, as though it was completely normal to be giving Mike all of the research.

El was left alone with Brenner. She relaxed her hold on him.

"You're stronger than I remember. And what did you just say to Flagg and Barlow? I could only hear the din of tinnitus in my ears. It doesn't really matter though. You won't get away from me this time." He laughed.

"You have no idea what I'm capable of doing." El was seething. "I've been hiding from you for so long. I'm not doing it anymore. I'm happy now and you can't take that away from me too. I won't let you. I was 21 years old before I ever got a fucking hug! You deprived me of everything good that a child should experience. Even though I was scared and alone it was better than being anywhere near *you*. And I'm not scared or alone anymore. Somehow I managed to find the best person in the world and he loves me for who I am, not for what I can do. And you can't even *comprehend* what I can do."

"Now, Eleven, you're still just a child. You always will be, you know. You can't possibly live a happy life in the regular world. You are an experiment. You are a weapon. I let you get away from me because I was being careless but I am no longer careless. You, however, will always be a number. You're a piece of equipment, Eleven. I know you won't kill me. There would be witnesses and how would you explain it?"

El wanted to throw him into the wall. She wanted to rip his limbs off one by one. She knew she had to be smarter though.

"You're right. I'm not going to kill you. You are."

In Brenner's office Flagg showed Mike the folders on the computer that held Brenner's research. Always prepared, Mike had a flash drive with him and was able to easily copy the files, deleting them from the hard drive when he was finished. Flagg was very helpful, taking the suggestion that El had put in his mind and really doing it justice. He knew where important papers were and in which drawers of the desk Brenner kept his most valuable documents. Mike also was able to find the 011 file that El had seen Brenner looking at when she was in the void. He grabbed it. He stacked all the papers on the desk neatly together and took those as well.

Flagg was still whistling as they made their way back to the room where El and Brenner were. Dr. Barlow and Mr. Gray met them in the hallway. They carried with them a square zippered bag about the size of a suitcase. Barlow handed the bag over to Mike. Everyone was smiling like they were on their way to a party. Mike marveled at how strongly El's suggestions had affected them.

As they stepped into the room, El and Brenner were facing each other, standing about six feet apart.

"No more," El said coldly. Her eyes were fixated on Brenner. Mike knew she was communicating with the man but he couldn't read what she was telling him.

Brenner walked to a cabinet at the front of the room. He opened a drawer and removed a scalpel. The metal gleamed in the brightness of the fluorescent lighting overhead. He smiled at El, walking back toward her with the razor sharp knife, pointing it at her. Mike was suddenly horrified that Brenner would lunge at El.

"I should have done this sooner," Brenner said before slicing open his own throat with the scalpel in one quick motion. He dropped to his knees before falling over in a heap on the floor.

El stepped aside, avoiding the blood that was spraying from Brenner's neck. Barlow and Flagg rushed to him but he was already gone.

Mike pulled El closer to him. Mr. Gray had joined Flagg and Barlow at Brenner's lifeless body, the three men kneeling in the growing pool of blood.



Reaching out with her mind, she caused the men to experience total loss of any memories of Mike and El, only remembering the exact moment that Brenner had taken his life. El and Mike, or Willa Mayfield and Dustin Sinclair, were erased completely from their brains. The couple eased out of the room unnoticed, the chaos of the situation making it easy to slip away.

They exited through a side door so they could avoid the receptionist. Once they were in the car, El broke down in tears. Mike drove a short distance to a parking lot away from the lab building and then parked the car. He got out and went to El's side, opening the door and pulling her up to him, holding her as she continued to cry.

*Shh, it's over.*

Mike reassured her time and again. She was shaking from all the adrenaline coursing through her body combined with the still very present euphoria from the drugs she'd been given. It was a strange juxtaposition. They stood communicating without words.

*I'm sorry, Mike, I had to make him do it. I can't keep living in fear that he'll find me and I couldn't let him hurt any more children.* Fresh tears spilled from El's eyes.

*It's okay. I know you had to do it. You're safe now and he can never get you. Never.* Mike rubbed her back.

*I made the others forget us entirely too.*

Mike slid the wig off of El's head. *You don't need this anymore. Now you can just be you.*

El finally stopped shaking, sighing heavily into Mike's embrace, regaining her composure. "Are you still feeling the effects of whatever they gave us?" She asked before they got back into the car.

"I still feel that same weird feeling. It's not awful, I'll say that."

"I know. I feel it too."

Once back at the hotel, El collapsed onto the bed, Mike falling right next to her. It was still early as far as the day went, being just a little before 3:30, but both of them were still feeling the effects of the study medications.

"What are we going to do with all of these drugs? We can't fly with them." Mike snuggled into El, his long form folding in so that he could fit his head on her chest.

"I think we should try to figure out what they are. There's probably a way to reference them online by their shape and color. Unless they're illegal. We can destroy them afterwards. But I think we could fly with them. I could get them on the plane with no one noticing." El played with Mike's hair.

"God, you're amazing. I don't know that we need to do that though. And I can't remember exactly what the pills they gave us looked like," Mike said, lifting his head to look at El.

"I can. I remember everything. Let's look."

They opened the bag containing the medications and started to sort through them. Mike let El do most of the work, as she was the one who remembered. She found the same combination with little effort, grouping them together on the bed.

"We're going to destroy these, but I'm keeping some so you can experience it again." El looked at Mike, her shy smile disarming him slightly. Then she continued sorting the pills. Before she put them all into one vial she took a picture so that even if her memory faltered she could look back and see the exact combination again. When she was satisfied she put everything away, stowing the container she would take back home with them in her carry on bag.

*Can you still hear me?*

Mike wasn't sure how long his new ability would last so while El had her back turned putting the pills in her bag he sent her a thought. El whipped around, her eyes locking with his.

Yes.

She climbed back up onto the bed, nestling into Mike. She found that she liked him being able to be so inside her head.

*I like it when you're in my head.* El hugged him tightly.

*Normally I can only get messages from you. I can't read your mind. But I can right now. I just wanted you to know.* Mike admitted to her.

El realized that they might not have a lot of time left before the drugs wore off and she wanted to take full advantage of Mike being able to read her mind.

"I want you to read my thoughts, Mike. Right now anyway, while you still can. Just don't get scared if I seem desperate for you. I don't tell you everything that I think and I don't want to scare you with my feelings about you. It might be a little intense."

Mike lifted her chin from his chest, their faces almost touching. "Nothing you could think will scare me, El." As their lips met he focused on her thoughts, a series of fast moving ideas. When El spoke she was usually methodical about her speech but her thoughts apparently were quite the opposite. There were so many that it was hard for Mike to catch them all.

*I want forever. I would die if I lost him. I didn't know I could ever feel this way. I like feeling like he could overpower me. It makes me feel kind of, I don't know, sexy I guess. He sang to me. His lips are so soft, I can't get enough. Oh, he's listening to me. I already forgot. When he kisses me I forget my name. He makes me feel normal. He's given me everything. I don't deserve him. I don't want to see into the future, I hope that part goes away. I made a man kill himself today. I'm a terrible person.*

As he heard the thought, Mike pulled back. He lovingly stroked El's face. "You're not a terrible person. Don't ever think that."

"But maybe there was something I could have done instead. My plan originally had been to make him see something that drove him mad. I was afraid it wouldn't last forever though." El's eyes started to well with tears.

"And then you'd still always be wondering if he was looking for you."

As long as he was alive you were never going to be really free from him. Even if he wasn't trying to find you, there would still always be that chance and you'd still live in fear. El, you did the right thing. You are a good person." As he started kissing her again, Mike sent his own thoughts.

*I love being with you. Everything I know is nothing until I share it with you. You are all I'll ever want, I know it. I feel it.*

Tears slipped down El's cheeks as Mike continued to kiss her. He went on with his thinking.

*As long as we're together nothing else will ever matter to me. I want forever too, El.*

They got more heated, El letting Mike's words affect her, choosing to believe them to be true. The events of the morning faded away as they got lost in one another. Once they had started it occurred to both of them that there was probably some sort of aphrodisiac in the cocktail of medication they'd been given because it was even more intense and enduring than anything they had ever done. El smiled. At least she'd gotten one good thing from Brenner.

By the time they woke up the next morning the medication had worn off. El could no longer see any glimpses into the future, which made her happy. The future wasn't something she wanted to be able to know.

"I want to go home soon." They were still lying in bed, just cuddling.

"Okay, we can. Would you like to go see some things in Seattle today? It's finally not raining. We can go to the Space Needle and have lunch at the Pike Place Market. We should spend at least one day doing something for us."

"That sounds good. You always make things better. I'm sorry you can't read my thoughts anymore." El hung her head. She knew how special it had made Mike feel to be able to do what she could do and it had made *her* feel special too. He was the only person she had ever

invited into her mind.

Mike kissed her hand. "It's okay. You can still read mine. That's enough."

Mike called the airline to make sure that they would be able to fly back to Chicago the next day. After finalizing their flight plans El inquired if the hotel had an incinerator, only needing to use a modicum of persuasion on the concierge, and then was able to dispose of the remaining medication they would not be taking back with them to Chicago. She had kept enough so that if he wanted to Mike could tap into his talents at least ten more times. The vial she had used to put the portion she was keeping in was on the larger side. Once the medication was destroyed they explored Seattle. From the top of the Space Needle they could see Mount Rainier, the peak appearing to keep watch over the city. They walked the maze that was Pike Place Market, finally choosing a nice little seafood restaurant that offered views of the bay.

"Do you really think your friends will accept me if I tell them my secret?" El looked out at the water, they had asked for a table outside since the weather was nice that day.

"If you don't want to tell them you don't have to. I'll never push you to do it. But they're *your* friends too, El. I think they will still accept you. They're just as nerdy as I am. They will be able to handle having a superhero for a friend." Mike smiled earnestly. "I *do* kind of like being the only one who knows your secret though."

"We can think about it. I think it would be something that needed to be done in person so we still have a couple of months before school is finished." El smiled back at him.

*I kind of like you being the only one who knows my secret too. You know me better than anyone ever has.*

Mike reached across the table and took her hand in his.

"I will never stop loving it when you do that."

It was late when they landed in Chicago. Even though after they had finished with Brenner they had let themselves enjoy a bit of a mini vacation, they were both glad to be back to their normal life, only now it would be without the cloud of Brenner hanging over El. Mike had been checking his phone daily to see if there was any news on the doctor's death. He only managed to find one obituary listing. Brenner really had been grasping at anything he could. His termination from the Federal Science Agency had severely tarnished his reputation. His death was ruled a suicide. No great loss.

El seemed lighter than he had ever seen her. She was tired but she was happy, her smile not wavering from the airport to Mike's car and back to their apartment. They were still too keyed up from flying so they didn't go to bed right away. Instead Mike sat on the sofa, El's head in his lap. He massaged her head while they zoned out to late night television.

"I was thinking that maybe we can tell everyone only *some* of what I can do. Maybe we can keep the telepathy part to ourselves. I could tell them the things I've always been able to do. I think I want the other part to be just for you and me."

She was looking up at him so expectantly, with so much hope in her eyes. Mike could almost *feel* himself falling even harder for her. He wasn't sure if she was reading his mind but he thought some things in case she was.

*My love for you is unfathomable. I would do absolutely anything for you. I love how you're the strongest person I'll ever know but you are so vulnerable with me. You make me feel better than I am.*

"That would be perfect. Just for you and me." Mike smiled down on her. She seemed even happier.

*You make me feel better than I am too. You give me so much confidence.* El's beguiling gaze transfixed Mike. He couldn't look away but didn't want to anyway. *Do you want to go to bed?*

"You read my mind."

## Notes for the Chapter:

I know that happened quickly. El's showdown with Brenner is not the main focus of the overall story so I didn't want to take up too much time with it. I like fluffy Mileven. Now they can get back to that and El can experience life without always looking over her shoulder. I don't plan for this story to go on forever but there will be a few more chapters, one including the Party. Yay. My favorite thing to write, lol. But it must be done. Thanks for reading! I appreciate the comments.

## 13. Chapter 13

The final weeks of the semester found Mike and El back in the swing of regular school life. Their classes went smoothly. After the events of the previous few months, getting good grades without chaos surrounding them was almost too easy. They settled in and the time seemed to fly by. Summer break was just around the corner.

No longer having to live in fear of being found by Brenner, El became more friendly, more outgoing. She would never be what could be considered an extrovert but she felt more comfortable in larger crowds than before. While Mike was happy that she had a renewed sense of freedom he secretly worried that her sudden friendliness would invite her to have friends that weren't him, friends that perhaps she'd find more interesting. He knew he shouldn't worry about such things but he still found it difficult to keep such thoughts at bay. He spent the majority of his last class of the day before the weekend thinking about what he would do if she found someone she wanted to be with more than him.

Mike had been in a funk all week long. He was still in a sort of funk when El met him at their usual place. She eyed him but didn't say anything other than her usual hello and kissing him like she normally did. She knew something was bothering him and she knew what it was. She had become so strong in her abilities that even if they were on opposite sides of the campus she could still read his mind. It wasn't something she normally did but today she had sensed that he was down so she sought him out and then it became clear to her what his issue was. So when she saw him she knew.

Mike was quiet on their way home.

"I know you're probably reading my mind. I'm sorry I'm so down," Mike said as he drove. He wasn't looking at her.

"I'm not reading your mind. I only do that if I feel like I need to. I do know that you're down though. I'm going to take care of that," El said honestly. She had been thinking for some time of what she was going to do to make him feel better.



Mike turned his head a bit to look in her direction. She smiled at him like she always did, a very particular smile that was reserved for only him.

When El had realized how Mike was feeling she wanted to immediately go to him and tell him all of her reasons that he was the only person she would ever possibly want to be with but she wanted to do something special for him, let him know that he was the source of undying interest for her. On Monday she had ordered a couple of things from the Internet to try to make him feel better. She knew she could just tell him everything she was feeling but she wanted to present it in a way that made Mike know that she had spent time thinking of how to make him feel loved.

Mike stopped at the mailbox before they went inside. There was a package addressed to El.

“Oh, good. It came!” El was excited but Mike didn’t know why.

“What is it?” Mike asked, still sounding down but trying to act more upbeat.

“It’s a surprise,” El replied, winking at him. Her smile melted his heart a bit and he felt himself start to let go of some of his inner doubts.

“Well what *kind* of surprise?” Mike persisted.

“I’ll tell you what. Go get comfortable, like pajamas or something, and I will too. Then I’ll show you.”

Mike couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her eyes so sparkly. She really looked excited about whatever it was she was going to show him. They both changed, El being the quickest. Mike found her in the living room on the sofa after he’d put on his pajamas. It was still daylight outside.

She was holding the small package in her hand. When Mike sat down she began to open it.

"I know you've been feeling worried, or down, or sad maybe, thinking sometimes that I might find someone I'd rather be with. Mike, I want you to know that could never happen. Thinking about you makes me happy. You are the person who makes me happiest in the whole world. As long as I have you I'll never need anyone else." She had managed to get the tape off and was slowly removing something from the small box. She held it in her hand but kept her hand closed.

"Close your eyes and hold out your hand," El instructed Mike. Her voice sounded hopeful. Mike did as she asked.

Mike felt something slightly cool land in his palm. It was clearly made of metal.

"You can open your eyes," El said, grinning at Mike. His eyes shot open but instead of looking first to what was in his hand his eyes instinctively went to hers. She noticed and it made her smile wider. El watched as Mike finally did look down at his opened hand.

Mike gazed at the tiny pewter figures. He knew immediately what they were and he even thought he might know the reasoning behind them. He wanted to hear it from El though. He looked expectantly at her.

"It's us. A paladin and a mage. I got the female mage because most of the others had beards. I liked this one. Anyway, I wanted to give you something tangible to let you know that I'll always feel like we're on a quest *together* and I'll always need you to be my paladin. I'll always need you to make me feel better and to reassure me. You know when I need to be held, you know when I'm tired. You know when I'm feeling worried or happy. Your power is that you can anticipate everything I need. You always have. Please don't ever think that I could want someone or something else because I just never could."

Mike couldn't read El's mind but he could read her face. He had always been able to. He could see her sincerity. His doubts were completely erased.

“El, you are awesome. How much research did you have to do to figure out what we were?” Mike pulled her toward him until she was almost in his lap.

“I emailed Dustin, actually. He told me what you were and I figured out the mage part on my own. Will you teach me how to play? I want to know before we see everyone again. I want to be in the Party.” Mike could feel her smile against his chest.

“You want to learn? Of course I’ll teach you. Does this mean that you’ll go back to Hawkins with me when I go? I’m keeping the apartment so if you don’t want to I won’t ever make you.”

“I want to go anywhere you’ll be. I’d miss you too much if you went without me. And I want to see your, I mean, *our* friends again.”

Mike spent the next three hours highlighting the different aspects of Dungeons & Dragons as El listened, enraptured at his every word. It wasn’t that she was terribly interested in the game, although she *did* want to learn so that she could play with everyone, but she was definitely interested in *Mike* and how excited he got while telling her about it, how serious he took it. He had even stopped at one point to retrieve a large binder from his room and showed her some different campaigns he had been working on. She was impressed with his stories. She told him as much.

“No wonder you’re the Dungeon Master. These are amazing stories, Mike.” El beamed up at him.

*But not as amazing as you are. I promise.*

Mike stopped talking about D&D and kissed his love, his uncertainty lifted and replaced by assurance.

As the semester ended El discovered that she was feeling more and more excited to go back to Hawkins and see Mike’s family and their friends. It was a foreign concept to her. She had never expected to *want* to go, only assuming that if she went back it would be for Mike

and that she'd always feel some sort of unease while she was there. Now she was feeling hopeful and happy. The weight of her past had completely lifted and she couldn't wait to see how it felt to be there with no fears clawing at her mind.

Unlike at Christmas, Mike had informed his mother that El would be joining him for the few weeks that he would be back at home. Karen had been overjoyed at the prospect of incorporating El more into the family. She even told Mike that she would have Holly help her set up the basement for them so they would be comfortable.

On the last night at their Chicago apartment before they went back to Hawkins Mike and El had a long discussion about what she was going to tell their friends about her abilities. They were lounging on the sofa, Mike behind El, holding her against him while their legs lay outstretched on the remaining cushions.

"I'm going to tell them. I think the first time we're back together would be best," El said.

"Are you going to tell them everything?" Mike asked.

"Not everything. I'm going to tell them about the lab, about Brenner. I'll tell them about escaping and growing up. But I'm not going to tell them our secret. The other stuff I can do, I don't even know if I would have realized it if not for you, and I certainly wouldn't be as strong as I am now, so I consider that *ours*. It's special and I want it just for us. Is that okay?" She looked at him thoughtfully.

"It's definitely okay. I like how you think." El felt Mike's nose nuzzle her neck near her ear and sighed. She loved sitting with him like that.

Before they went to bed, Mike sent an email to his friends.

*Party People,*

*Let me know when everyone is back in town. We need to get together. There's something we need to talk about. Everyone be safe going home.*

*Over and out.*

*Mike*

By the time everyone got back to town, El and Mike had been in Hawkins for a few days. Mike had taken her by the lab and she felt an actual sense of closure. She no longer wanted to cry when she saw it; the real monster hadn't been the building after all and now the real monster was dead. He took her to the quarry and they sat on the same rock where he had asked her to be his girlfriend.

"A lot has happened since we were here last. I want you to know that while some of it was scary, I don't for one second regret going through it with you," Mike told her as they sat together, hands entwined.

"Neither do I. I feel closer to you now, like nothing could ever separate us." El rested her head against his shoulder and he moved his arm so that it draped around her.

"I was serious when I said I wanted forever," Mike turned to look at her.

"I was too," El said. "I don't care what people call that either. I don't need labels, I only need you. So don't think I'm expecting anything other than you at my side. That's really all I want."

Mike looked out at the water. He knew what she was talking about, he thought about it all the time. Somehow he felt like they seemed more than what that label personified. They seemed beyond forever. He didn't want to group them into some institution that was mostly destined for failure. But he did like the idea of El wearing a ring on her finger. She would look nice in something like that. They wouldn't need pageantry, they only needed each other, but she deserved something special, if for no other reason than for her to have a symbol of his love.

That had been three days ago. Now they were sitting in his parents'

basement waiting for everyone to arrive. Will, Dustin, and Lucas were already there. Max would be over soon. She had wanted to get her skateboard out of storage at her mom's house. Lucas, rolling his eyes, had told Mike that she had plans to skate all summer.

"So what's the big news? You two getting married?" Dustin asked, laughing. Mike and El shared a look. "No, I was kidding! Really?"

"No, that's not what we were going to tell you," Mike started to explain. He was cut off by Dustin.

"You eloped! I knew it!" Dustin looked triumphant.

"We are not already nor are we getting married. It has nothing to do with that," Mike said.

*Maybe we won't, but I wouldn't say no.*

Mike looked at El, who was smirking at him. He almost forgot what he'd been saying.

"Um, when Max gets here we'll get into it. El, do you think this is where we want to be? Would somewhere else be better? Somewhere more private?" Mike asked.

"Jeez, what's with all the cloak and dagger?" Will asked. "Are you guys selling drugs? Is this some fucked up Tupperware party where we try your product?" He started laughing and the others joined him, including Mike and El.

They were still laughing when Max walked in.

"What did I miss? I'm ten minutes late and everyone has an inside joke that I'm not part of. Typical." Max huffed.

"Will was just suggesting that maybe Mike and El have started a side business of selling drugs and that's what they wanted to tell us about and it was too funny. You didn't miss anything," Lucas told his girlfriend.

“Maybe we *should* all go somewhere else, Mike. Is there somewhere we could go where we wouldn’t run into any other people?” El answered Mike when everyone finally stopped laughing.

“We could go to the junkyard,” Dustin said. “I don’t think anyone would be there since it’s the weekend. There has literally never been anyone there any time I’ve ever gone.”

The others agreed. It had been a place they played in a lot as kids and they held fond memories of it. They took two cars to get there, with Mike, El, and Will in one car and Lucas, Max, and Dustin in the other.

It was late afternoon but since it was close to summer the days were longer. The late May weather was nice. El had never been to a junkyard but it was just as she pictured it. There were rusty old cars, pieces of scrap metal lying about, empty oil drums, an old school bus that looked like it had been sitting in the yard since the early ‘80s. She could understand why the boys would have wanted to play there as kids. She found herself wishing she could have joined them then.

Mike had two blankets in the trunk of his car so he got them out so they wouldn’t have to sit in the dirt. They sat in some semblance of a circle. El could see that the others were patiently waiting for whatever it was that Mike and El had been so secretive about.

“So what’s going on?” Max asked. She was kind about it; not a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Mike looked at El. She nodded at him.

“Well you guys are our friends. I love you like family, maybe *more* than family, and we trust you. We want to be honest with you because friends don’t lie. El has some things she wants to tell you.” He squeezed her hand.

El took a deep breath and looked at Mike.

*I hope you’re listening because you can do this and I love you so much.*

She instantly felt better. She looked around the circle at each of their friends before she started.

“I was raised in the lab here in Hawkins. I was an experiment. I escaped when I was twelve. I was always looking over my shoulder, always afraid they would find me.”

“You were raised in the lab? Why?” Dustin asked.

“My name isn’t really El. That’s a nickname. My name is Eleven.” El held up her wrist, sliding the bracelet she was wearing back so they could all see her tattoo.

“What the fuck?” Lucas whispered.

“It was a government program trying to test medications for mind control and my mother took part in the study when she was pregnant with me. They took me when I was born. I never knew her at all. She named me Jane.” El looked down. Telling them about her mother was bringing up sad feelings. She blinked back tears. Mike put his arm around her.

“Remember that November before Will got so sick when we were twelve? Remember how rainy it was that one night? That’s the night she escaped, through that storm pipe we used to yell into when we would pretend to be the Rebels infiltrating the Death Star. She crawled through that barefoot wearing only a hospital gown.” The image of her doing that made Mike cringe, wanting to hold her tight enough to take away the bad memory.

“Why did they want you? What were they trying to do?” Will asked.

“That’s the thing. You guys have to promise it stays with us, within the Party only. It’s a big deal and we trust you, but it’s so important that you don’t break our trust. Don’t break *El’s* trust.” Everyone nodded, still looking confused.

El looked at Mike. She was hesitant but his eyes were warm, encouraging.



"I can show you." El stood up and walked a few feet away from the group. All eyes were on her. She focused on an old car that was to their right. It started to shift slightly. Gasps could be heard but she didn't lose focus. Her right arm outstretched toward the car after a few seconds and the entire piece of metal lifted off the ground. She set it down thirty feet away from where it had previously been. She turned back to her friends. All of them were slack-jawed except Mike. He looked so *proud* of her. She sat back down beside him and he wrapped both arms around her.

"Son of a bitch! How did you *do* that?" Dustin exclaimed.

"What just happened?" Max asked to no one in particular.

"Cool!" Will said, completely unfazed by the show.

Lucas hadn't said anything. He seemed to be lost in thought. El finished explaining.

"I can do things like that. The people at the lab would make me do a lot of things I didn't want to do. They didn't care about *me*, they only cared about my ability. After I escaped I was all alone but it was still better than being there. And then I met Mike and my life has been better than I could have hoped for ever since."

"They wanted to turn you into a weapon," Lucas said, finally breaking his silence. His face looked pained. "That makes me sick."

"Can you do anything else?" Dustin asked, an expression of awe on his face.

"I can find people anywhere. I can close my eyes and concentrate and see them, see where they are, what they're saying. So I guess they wanted to also use me as a spy."

"Anything else?" Max asked.

"That's all I could do as a child. I've gotten better at it as I aged. I used to get nosebleeds a lot when I'd use my abilities."

“Holy shit! The shooting at your school! You *did* stop it, didn’t you?! That guy’s gun didn’t malfunction, you blew it the fuck up!” Dustin was so excited he was standing and jumping.

“Yes, that’s what happened. It scared me to death. She was so tired for the next couple of days. I was freaking out a little bit,” Mike said, pulling El closer to him. She warmed at his display of affection.

“Wow, El, that’s so amazing. When I saw that video and then I saw you I didn’t know what you were doing but it makes total sense now. You are a badass!” Dustin knelt behind her and gave her a hug, giving Mike one right after.

“So you’re not afraid to come back here to Hawkins?” Max asked. She remembered how timid El had seemed to times when they were back at Christmas.

“Not anymore. The lead scientist isn’t there anymore,” El explained.

“That sick son of a bitch made her call him *Papa*. How fucked up is that? Then he’d lock her up if he wasn’t happy with how she performed. She was just a little kid.” Mike’s voice started to tremble but El pulled him closer and kissed his cheek.

“It’s okay, Mike. I’m okay now.”

“What happened to him?” Will asked.

Mike and El shared a glance.

*Should I tell them?* El thought.

*Only what you want to tell them.* Mike answered her.

“You guys are staring at each other for an awfully long time.” Max brought them back to their present conversation. El turned back to the others.

“He got fired from his government job when I escaped. He started a covert lab in Washington state. I found out that he was planning

another study but his end goal was to have his test subjects end up pregnant while they were on the medications he was giving them, trying to make another baby with special abilities. Mike and I went there over spring break. He killed himself when I confronted him.” El hoped that explanation would suffice.

“So you’re telekinetic. Anything else?” Lucas asked.

“I’m really good with computers. I understand them.” El didn’t want to go too deep into how much she understood them.

“Guys, El was worried that you wouldn’t still accept her if she told you her secret. Do any of you feel any differently about her? Be honest.” Mike looked to each of his friends.

“I’m cool with El being a badass superhero, definitely.” Dustin smiled.

“Me too. It’s not what you can do, it’s who you are that means the most.” Will added.

“I’m just glad to have another girl in the group. I liked you when I met you and that hasn’t changed.” Max, who was sitting on the other side of El, bumped her with her shoulder.

“You fit right in with the party. You’re just weird enough, and Mike is never letting you go, so I’m cool with you too,” Lucas said. “But seriously, that is messed up, what you had to go through. It makes me ill to think that our government would do that to a kid. I’m so sorry, El.”

“It’s not your fault, Lucas. But I’m glad that you’re okay with me.” El gave Lucas a reassuring smile.

Having her friends all accept her made El happy.

They spent the next couple of weeks hanging out with the Party. The other boys had been impressed at El’s sudden knowledge of the game

of D&D and they welcomed her into their game. Max even reluctantly played, not wanting to be left out. During one particularly heavy campaign, when they were deep in an infestation of orcs, El was shining with her game moves and her rolls of the die. Mike found himself looking across the table at her, thinking to himself how much he loved her.

*I love you too.*

El looked back at him and he sat up, not realizing that she had been listening.

*You're going to make me give away our secret. I know I look like a lovesick fool when you do that.*

Mike smiled dopily at her. El turned red.

*You do not.*

Max was watching the exchange, keeping her opinions to herself, a sly smirk spreading on her face.

Three days before Mike and El were going to go back to Chicago, Mike asked Max to go do something with El, saying she didn't get to do a lot of girly things.

"I don't know how girly you think I am, Wheeler, but I'd be happy to hang out with El for a day." Max had sounded amused.

She picked El up at Mike's house. El wasn't sure what was going on but she was happy to spend the day with Max. She had promised not to try to get into Mike's head at any point, knowing that whatever he was working on he would share with her when he was ready.

The two girls ended up having lunch and then going to a park where Max showed El some of her skateboard tricks. She was a little rusty, having not been on her board in a few months, but El was still impressed. After Max had tired herself out a bit they sat on a bench and talked.

“I think you should know that it’s really cool, what you can do,” Max told El.

“You really think so? I always felt like I was some sort of freak. I never had any friends before I met Mike.”

“When did he find out your secret?” It had just occurred to Max that Mike probably already knew when they had been home for Christmas.

“It didn’t take him long. I like to write in journals but I stupidly dropped one in the hallway of the chemistry building and Mike found it. My name wasn’t in it but I did detail a lot of my fears and my abilities. Then we wound up being lab partners and we just clicked. After a while he realized that the writing in the journal he’d found and my handwriting matched but he didn’t call me out on it. He invited me to watch movies at his house on Halloween and I fell asleep on him and when I woke up I freaked out and made the light bulbs explode and ran away. He ran after me with no shoes and no coat on and told me he had to tell me something. I went back to his place and he told me about the journal. He was so understanding. He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Max.”

“Was this before he sang to you?”

“No. It was after. We had already been spending a lot of time together. He’s always made me feel comfortable. I never thought I’d have that.” El thought of Mike and it made her feel a fluttery sensation inside. “He’s my first *everything*.”

Max gawked at El. “So you’ve slept with him now then?” Max’s eyebrow raised.

El smiled but was also blushing a deep shade of red. “Um, yeah.”

“And?”

“It’s like, *transcendent*,” El replied.

“Oh, Jesus. Way to go, Wheeler!” Max laughed. So what are your plans after school? Just one more year.”

“I’m going to go to grad school to do biomedical science and Mike’s going to medical school for neurology. We can still live at our apartment. It’ll work out well.”

“So your future with Mike is all planned out?” Max asked, finding it funny how El’s facial expressions would suddenly animate when she was mentioning Mike.

“Well maybe not *all* planned out but I definitely want him in my future. I want to be with him always. I love him more than I ever thought possible.”

“It’s pretty obvious that he loves you too. I could have sworn you two were having some sort of mental conversation when we were in the basement the other day,” Max casually commented.

El laughed. “We just get lost in each other’s eyes sometimes.” She thought it was a good recovery. She would have to be careful when Max was around. She was too observant.

“I get it,” Max said, making El feel better.

When Max dropped El back off at Mike’s, Mike was in the basement. She hadn’t spoken to him since that morning, not even having checked in telepathically at any point during the day.

“I didn’t realize how much I’d miss hearing you in my head. I’m glad you’re back. Did you have fun?” Mike asked as he swept her into his arms. She gladly reciprocated the hug.

“I did have fun. I like just talking with Max. It’s nice to have a friend who’s a girl.”

“That’s why I wanted you guys to hang out before we go back home.” Mike buried his head in her hair.

“Home. I like being here but I’m ready to be back at our place. Just you and me.” El sighed into his chest.

“I know what you mean.” Mike started to sway, dancing to unheard music.

“Here, let me help.” El smiled lovingly at him and suddenly the room was filled with soft music.

They danced for a while and then went to bed. There were two air mattresses set up in the basement but Mike and El only needed one.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I thought this might be the last chapter but it looks like there will be one more. Thanks to everyone for sticking with this story and for all the positivity surrounding it. Watch out for extreme amounts of fluff in the final chapter. Love to all.

## 14. Chapter 14

Chicago was inundated with heavy rains the night Mike and El drove back from Hawkins. Mike had to drive slowly just to see the road. They had already passed two car accidents that were being dealt with by emergency personnel and another four cars just sitting on the side of the road, waiting out the storm. Mike wanted to get *home*.

Just before they turned into their neighborhood there was a frighteningly loud crash of thunder accompanied by lightning etched broadly across the darkened sky. The car in front of them swerved into the lane of oncoming traffic but just before it hit the car that was traveling in the opposite direction the entire vehicle slid back into its proper position in traffic. Mike looked over at El. She had saved the lives of the people in both cars.

"You saved them. You saved them and they'll never know." Mike's voiced was hushed.

"But I'll know. That's enough." El wanted to hold his hand but he needed to keep them both on the wheel. She settled for resting her hand on the back of his neck, fondling his hair.

When they got to their apartment the rain was still coming down in droves. They had decided that once they got home they would leave their bags in the car and get them the next day, thinking they could escape the torrents faster if they could just run to the stairwell without lugging bags with them.

"There is one thing I want to grab tonight," Mike said after he parked the car. He unfastened his seatbelt and rummaged through the backseat, returning to the front holding an old metal Star Wars lunch box. *The Empire Strikes Back* to be exact.

"You need a lunch box tonight?" El asked almost comically.

"It's what's *inside* the lunch box. And don't get any ideas, Professor X. I've got my eye on you." Mike winked at her and then kissed her cheek. "Ready to run?"



"Ready."

They dashed to their apartment but still were soaked from head to toe when they reached the door, both laughing. Mike set his lunch box on the coffee table before they both set off down the hall to change into dry clothes.

"I think I'm just going to take a shower, is that fine?" El called from her bedroom.

"Sure, whatever you need," Mike answered. He wanted her to be comfortable. He had plans for the evening.

While El was in the shower Mike dried off and changed into his pajamas. It was already almost 9:00 so there really was no reason not to. He sat on the sofa and went through the contents of his lunch box, adding the two more items he brought out of his hiding place for them in his bedroom. He smiled to himself and closed the lid.

El finally joined him on the sofa. Mike noticed that she was wearing one of his Star Wars t-shirts and a pair of rather short white cotton shorts, one of his favorite pajama combinations. He loved it when she wore his clothes. She smelled really good too, like fresh apricots. It reminded him of one of his older sister's Strawberry Shortcake dolls from when he was a kid. He would hold them up to his nose and sniff them until she yelled at him and tore them out of his hand. Apricot had been his favorite.

He realized he had just been staring at her when he heard her in his head.

*Who is Apricot?*

"Oh, um, I'm sorry. You just smell really great. There was this cartoon called *Strawberry Shortcake* and Nancy had some dolls from it. Each one smelled like whatever their name was. Like, Strawberry Shortcake smelled like strawberries, Orange Blossom smelled like oranges, Lemon Meringue smelled like lemons, Blueberry Muffin smelled like blueberries, things like that. There was this little one called Apricot and she of course smelled like apricots and she was my favorite one to sniff. The way you smell right now reminded me of

that. I hadn't thought of it in years. Did you have a nice shower?"

"Yes. It's good to be home." El moved closer to Mike so she could lean against him. He could feel warmth radiating from her bare legs. "So, the lunch box? Are you going to tell me what's inside?"

Mike smiled. "I'm going to *show* you. There are some things inside and each one has a story. Want to hear some stories?"

"Yes, please."

Mike moved away from her slightly so she could be more of an audience and he could hold the lunch box so that she wouldn't see what was inside until he was ready for her to see.

"This first item I picked up a while back because it reminds me of you. I know you probably didn't have anything like this as a kid but we loved playing with these things." Mike held up a small action figure. "This is Jean Grey. I know your powers are really more like Professor X but he's in a wheelchair. And Jean is way hotter than he is." Mike winked at her. "If I remember correctly, Jean Grey is one of the first subjects we ever talked about back in chem lab on that first day, the day we met. Anyway, that's the first thing in this box." Mike set Jean Grey on the coffee table.

"We did talk about her. It made me feel good that you thought she was cool, and she was like me so I started to have the tiniest bit of hope that maybe you and I could be friends. I had always felt so alone and when you talked to me that day and you seemed so excited about something that was so close to what I was, I started to dream of what it might be like to be close to someone." El smiled at the memory.

"This next thing I got right after Halloween. I passed a rummage sale on the back side of campus and in one of the boxes were some toys. I think this came with a Michael Myers figure but the figure was already gone. This wasn't though. Best 50 cents I ever spent. I wanted it because I wanted to look at it and remember that Halloween. It was a special one for me. I really loved spending it with you and it was also when I told you I knew your secret." He pulled out a small jack-o-lantern that looked exactly like the one in the opening credits

of *Halloween*. "How perfect is it that I found a jack-o-lantern from the first movie we ever watched together? And it's small so it can sit anywhere." Mike set the pumpkin next to Jean Grey.

"That day *was* special. I had been so excited the entire day, knowing I was getting to do something so *normal*. And I knew I liked you, but I was happy to just get to be your friend. You gave me my first hug of my life that night and I'll never forget it. I'll never forget how it felt to have you wrap your arms around me for the first time, or how you smelled when my face was pressed against your chest. It was something I had never felt before, I felt secure for the first time in my life. You also called me Eleven that night and gave me my nickname. It was one of the best things that will ever happen to me." El looked at Mike, her love for him evident in her tone of voice and in her smile.

Mike had to rip his gaze away from her, knowing he could stare at her and lose track of time. He had an endgame he was working toward and he needed to stay on target.

"I found this at my parents' house. It was in my dresser drawer in my room. I couldn't believe my mom hadn't thrown it out after all this time. I want you to have it because it pretty much symbolizes my entire childhood." Mike unfurled a piece of dark gray fabric that turned out to be a t-shirt. "This is the official shirt of the Hawkins Middle School A.V. Club. We were all in it. We were considered nerds and we got picked on but it was fun for us to work with electronics and technology. I wanted you to have something from my past that meant so much to me and played such a big role in who I am today." Mike handed El the shirt. She rubbed the fabric against her face, the years of age and countless tumbles in Karen Wheeler's washing machine causing it to be one of the softest shirts she'd ever felt. "The only other people who had one were Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Max, at least with that year on it. So only Party members have ever had that particular shirt, and that includes you."

"How do you manage to do that? To make even the ghosts of my memories happier? Thank you, Mike. I love this," El said, wiping away a tear.

"There are two more things in this lunch box. We can look tomorrow

if you're tired though."

"No! Now, now!" El was excited. Mike had only been kidding though. He knew he didn't want to wait until the next day.

"Okay, I also got this when we were in Hawkins. While you were hanging out with Max I was running some errands. I had to hunt for a while to find the perfect one but I think I finally found one that I'm happy with." Mike took out a stone that was a little smaller than the palm of his hand. It was a light gray color and smooth, it looked a little like a small moon. He handed it to El so she could hold it while he explained. "I spent a lot of time looking for this. It's marble from the rock, *our* rock, at the quarry. I had to climb down a little and it was a tad precarious but I know it came from that rock. I wanted you to have a piece of Hawkins that held only good memories. I sat on that rock as a kid, wondering if I'd ever find someone to understand me, and I stood on that rock as an adult, knowing I had finally found that person. Now you have a piece of it."

El held the stone against her chest, close to her heart.

"Are you ready for the last thing in the box?" Mike asked. "It has a long story, but it's a good one." El had been speechless since he told her about the rock from the quarry. She nodded.

"I also found this while you were with Max but they had to customize it for me. Lucas picked it up for me and slid it into my bag while we were all saying goodbye, when Dustin bear hugged you and turned you away from where Lucas and I were standing. Anyway, I want to tell you about it before I show you. Circles are never-ending. They make me think of no beginning and no end. I know we had a beginning but I felt like I'd always known you, even when we first met. Does that make sense?"

"I felt the same way. I was just afraid I was wanting it too much," El said quietly.

"So maybe we've always been the one for each other. Maybe in some other life, in some other universe, maybe in *every* universe, we're together. I like to think that's the way it is," Mike said.

El nodded in agreement.

"And sapphires have all sorts of special spiritual meanings, if you're into that, but I like how they supposedly are the stones of wisdom and learning and they're supposed to help you access deeper levels of consciousness. That makes me think of you. You are a walking deeper level of consciousness. And I know you like the color blue." Mike smiled. He reached into the lunch box and took out a small square jewelry box. "This can mean whatever you want but what it really means is *forever*. I will love you always, and when there's no more always I'll love you still. I know you said you don't care about labels but I still wanted to ask. Will you share forever with me?" Mike opened the box, revealing a brilliant blue sapphire flanked by two small diamonds set in a lovely simple white gold band. It wasn't fussy or overly ornate, it was perfect. El's hand went to her mouth.

"I know how society is, what they think. It might be easier and raise fewer questions if we got married, if you wanted to, that is. I just want to be with you forever and I wanted you to have a symbol of my love for you that you could have with you always." Mike took the ring out of the little box.

El was visibly shaking. Tears were starting to spill from her eyes but she was smiling too.

"Would you like to have this?" Mike asked, holding the ring out to her. She nodded and held a shaky hand out to him. Her left hand. He gently slid the ring onto her finger. El didn't let him pull his hand away once he had finished placing the ring on her hand. She pulled him to her, using so much force that he ended up on top of her, both of them lying on the sofa. She was still crying.

*I love you with everything that I am, and you've taught me that I'm a lot. I would spend every forever with you on every plane of existence. I will definitely share forever with you here. Thank you for loving me. I can't talk right now, I'll cry too much.*

Mike kissed her then, both of them smiling. He couldn't believe he was going to spend the rest of his life with someone so amazing.

"So you liked your surprise?" Mike asked when El had regained her

composure and was no longer shaking.

"I might be able to do things you can't, but I'll never be as thoughtful as you are. I loved it, Mike. I love *you*. You might know me better than I know myself. This ring is so beautiful. How did you know I wouldn't really want a diamond ring?"

"I know you don't like to be flashy. And there are diamonds on this ring but they're small and they just compliment the sapphire. I think you look nice in blue so I went with that. Should I have chosen something else?" Mike worried.

"No! I love this so much. It's *perfect*. It's pretty, not gaudy. It's simple but classy. You couldn't have picked anything better if I had been with you and helped you choose. Does everyone know you got this for me?"

"They do. I'm proud of them for keeping the secret. I didn't say it was because I was asking you to *marry* me or anything, though I guess I kind of just did and I think they sort of assumed that. Is that okay with you?"

El touched his cheek softly. "I told you I wouldn't say no. I don't need labels, I only need you, but it makes me feel so good that you'd want to let the world know that I belong to you."

"Well you don't *belong* to me, I don't own you," Mike started.

"It's not a bad thing, Mike. I *want* to be yours. I *am* yours. I want the world to know it. You only want what's best for me. When I say *belong* I mean you are the most important person to me. You make me feel like I belong. I like belonging to you."

"Okay. But never think that I own you. We are partners. We'll keep each other happy and safe. When you get tired I'll take the wheel, so to speak," Mike said, shifting so that El was once again resting comfortably against him on the sofa.

"I feel like everything I went through as a kid was worth it if it led me to you." El took Mike's hand, kissing the back of it.

"I have one more surprise. In two weeks our friends are coming to

Chicago and we're going to go see the Cubs play at Wrigley and go eat and celebrate. I know we're not really into baseball but Max and Lucas really want to go and I think we'll have fun."

"Really? That sounds great! I can't wait to see them again." El threw her leg over his and kissed him hard, sitting in his lap. They both laughed when Mike opened his eyes for a second while they were kissing and saw El admiring her ring. "I'm multitasking," she said, smiling radiantly.

Two weeks later their friends were all at their apartment. Everyone was getting ready to go to the game. Mike had scored tickets for them along the third baseline, close to the dugout. He was still surprised that he had gotten them. He wasn't really into baseball but that didn't stop him from taking his glove with him. El walked out of her room wearing his Hawkins Middle School A.V. Club shirt and some short jean shorts, her hair pulled up and her glasses on, looking sexy as hell. Mike couldn't prevent his feet from carrying him to where she stood.

*Damn, you look good in my shirt.*

El kissed him, but not a little peck. She kissed him passionately in their hallway, not caring if their friends saw.

*Maybe you can help me change out of this later tonight.*

Mike thought her newfound confidence might blow his mind.

They all stood around outside Wrigley Field waiting for the doors to open. The ground was paved with bricks that all had slogans or names or sentiments from fans. They passed the time reading the ones near where they were standing.

*"I bleed blue, let's play two, I don't get it,"* Will said.

"It's what Ernie Banks used to always say. They had a lot of double headers when he played," Lucas explained.

"My first words were CUBS WIN! Okay, I can understand that one," Dustin said. "Even I know that's what they always say here."

"Loyalty is...a Cubs fan. Like happiness is...a warm puppy. I like that one," El commented, looking down at the brick. "I like Charlie Brown. I used to read the comics the library had."

Finally the line started to move and they found their seats. They ate hot dogs and cheered, having more fun than Mike had thought they would. Max kept talking to the guys on deck like she was friends with them.

"Okay, look alive, Rizzo. Bring 'em home. Our boy on third needs you." Rizzo actually nodded in her direction.

On the first pitch Rizzo swung and missed.

"Good cut! Good cut! Settle down now," Max yelled.

They were all watching as the pitcher threw the next pitch. Rizzo swung early and the ball shot up toward the opposite side of the field, where the Party was sitting. Mike had his glove but it looked at first like the ball would stay in the field area, still foul but easily fielded by a player. As it reached the pinnacle of its arc and started to fall back toward the ground it came more and more toward Mike's outstretched glove. Other people were also trying to catch it but the ball soared neatly into the pocket of Mike's mitt, making a satisfying thumping sound as it landed. Mike looked at El, who flashed him a bright smile. They spent the remainder of the inning holding hands and kissing every few minutes.

Rizzo did manage to bring the man on third home when he hit the next pitch into the bleachers at the back of the field. The Party all sang along loudly to *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* during the seventh inning. They gave each other high fives as the Cubs went on to win the game. It turned out to be a lot of fun, and Mike had the coolest Cubs souvenir ever.

After going out for Chicago style pizza after the game, they all went



back to Mike and El's place. Mike had bought liquor and beer, actual Champagne this time for El, sparing no expense, and the boys planned to play video games while Max and El played the part of peanut gallery, laughing the entire time.

As everyone got more and more tipsy the boys started having trouble with their hand-eye coordination so they stopped playing games and just sat around talking.

"So when's the wedding?" Max asked.

"I don't need one of those. I have Mike and Mike's all I need." She looked around, Mike was sitting on the floor. "Mike? Come sit with me?" She'd had a few glasses of Champagne by then.

Mike scrambled to the sofa to sit next to El. She smiled contentedly.

*Thank you, my love.*

Mike pulled her into him more and El sighed.

"We might get it done on paper but if she doesn't want the big deal, we're not doing that," Mike explained.

"Sounds good to me, El. Sounds *great* to me," Lucas said. Max rolled her eyes.

"What will your mom say?" Will asked.

"We don't live in Hawkins. She can tell her friends whatever she wants. I'll appease her by letting her take pictures of us and I'll even smile. That should work." Everyone laughed, knowing Karen Wheeler's affinity for photographs.

They talked into the night, reminiscing about their youth. El hadn't been there but she enjoyed hearing the stories. They were so candid that she felt like she was still a part of it. Her stomach hurt from laughing so much.

When everyone was finally tired and ready for bed, Lucas and Max

took El's room and Dustin and Will camped out in the living room. Once Mike and El were in their room, Mike turned to El.

"You said maybe I could help you change? Is that still an option?" Mike asked, keeping his voice low.

"What should I wear instead?" El asked, more coyly than normal.

Mike grinned. "How about nothing?"

It was something they both agreed on.

"What if I hadn't taken that particular organic chem lab? Do you think we would have ever found each other?" El asked. They were lying in bed together, tired, satisfied, but not yet asleep.

"We'll never know, but since we'll never know we can believe what we want. I like to believe that we would have met at some point no matter what, because we were meant to be together. I like to think that as long as we ever crossed paths, whenever that might have been, we would find each other and realize our love. I know that sounds dopey and sappy but I don't care."

"I love it that you're such a romantic. And I agree, I'd like to think that we were always destined to meet and fall in love. You've changed my life, Mike. When you smile at me it's like, it's like..."

"Heavenly wine and roses? I know. It's that way for me too. It always has been. It always will be."

"Cool." El smiled, her head on his chest. He couldn't see her face but he knew she was happy.

"Cool."

## **Five Years Later**

El Wheeler had been in the lab for hours. She was currently synthesizing a medication that would have the primary focus of helping children who were unable to speak for whatever medical

reason communicate with their caretakers to relay their needs. She had used the drugs she had taken from Martin Brenner years before while she was still in college and had at that time broken them down to see what their primary molecules were, learning much from her studies of them. Now she was using them for good. Her feet were as tired as her brain. She went home to an empty apartment.

Mike Wheeler was finishing up his first year of residency at The University of Chicago Medical Center. He had been on a 36 hour long shift and was feeling every hour of it. He was ready to be home. His keys jingled from his meteorite keychain as he headed to his car.

*Are you on your way home yet? I miss you.*

Mike heard her from wherever she was. Hearing his wife's thoughts in his mind always made him feel peaceful.

*I am. I can't get there soon enough. I miss you too.*

Even though he was tired he made it through the busy streets of Chicago unscathed, somehow missing every red light which caused his trip to seem shorter.

He was welcomed home by the smell of lasagna baking in the oven. The timer said it still had forty-five minutes to go. El was nowhere to be seen. He checked the bedroom.

El was lying on the bed sideways, asleep. She looked so peaceful, having changed into one of Mike's sweatshirts. She wasn't wearing pants because the shirt hung so low on her frame. Mike kicked off his shoes and climbed onto the bed next to her. He wrapped his arms around her, inhaling the scent of her hair. He hadn't seen her in almost two days. She felt him holding her and woke up.

"You're finally home. I'm glad you're here. I don't sleep as well when you're not beside me." El had rolled over so that she was facing him and was now burying her face in his neck, her arms around him holding on tightly.

"I know, I don't either. And those beds at the hospital aren't comfortable anyway. But just a couple more years. It'll be worth it in

the end. How's your medication coming along?" He started to scratch her back lazily while he listened to her report on her progress.

"I think it'll be ready for clinical trials soon. I really think I got it right. It won't have the effects it had on you, but I'm hoping it can help a lot of kids. Maybe not just kids."

"I once told you that you would do something special that saved the world. I was right." Mike kissed her forehead. She smiled at him shyly.

"I hope so.

"I *know* so." Mike stopped smiling and looked deep into her eyes. "El, you continue to amaze me every day. You're astonishing, like the X-Men. And you let me come along for the ride."

"We're partners, remember? I need you. You're my talisman, my lucky charm. More than that, you're my *heart*. Anything we don't know we can figure it out. We have so far." She kissed him, long and slow, until the timer in the kitchen broke them apart.

"Come on, we can eat on the sofa and I'll rub your feet afterwards. Let's just forget about the world for a while and just be us." Mike pulled her up off the bed. They held hands as they walked down the hall to the kitchen.

Sitting on the sofa eating their lasagna, El noticed that Mike seemed distracted.

"Is something wrong?" She asked.

Mike knew after being with her for so long that if she wasn't satisfied with his answer she would seek the truth for herself so he was always honest with her about his thoughts when she asked.

"I was just thinking."

"About what?" El prodded.

"About how much I love you and about how good you are with kids, about all the work you're doing to try to help the ones that need it. I

was wondering if you ever thought about having one of your own."

El was quiet. Finally she spoke, softly.

"I think about it a lot but I'm afraid of what I might pass on to one. It's one thing for me to have these abilities but for a little kid? That could cause so many problems. What if the other kids picked on them, what if they felt like a freak, like I did? What if they hated the way they were? I don't know if I could take that, Mike. It's a dream that I think I should let go of."

"But you didn't have anyone, El. If we had a child it would have both of us. We could help it understand everything, and help it understand itself if it came to that. You are so powerful, I think you could even understand what a baby was crying about. I'm not saying we have to, I'm just saying that if that's ever something you want, I'm on board. Together I think we could do it. I think we'd make someone great. Someone with your face and mind and with my nerdiness." Mike laughed, trying to lighten the mood.

"I'd want him or her to have your eyes and freckles though." El smiled at Mike.

"So does that mean you won't let go of that dream?" He asked.

"I won't let go if I know you're holding on too." El set her plate on the coffee table and turned to face Mike. "I had a dream, a real dream while I was asleep, not that long ago of a little girl with dark hair. I couldn't see her face totally but I knew she was mine. I could hear you singing to her from a room and I was standing in a hallway listening. My heart felt so full and happy. You were singing our song to her. She was so small in your arms. When I woke up I had tears on my cheeks. You were at the hospital so I didn't get to tell you. I didn't want to let myself think that could really be my life. But I want that, Mike. If you'd be there with me."

Mike smiled, setting his own plate down. He pulled El into him. "I want you to have everything you want, definitely everything I can give you. I just wanted to let you know that if that's something you want then I want it too."

"Then maybe that can be something we work on? If you have the time?" El asked, her eyes roaming from Mike's eyes to his lips.

"I can *make* time for you. You're the most important thing to me. Never forget that." Mike tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his hand lingering in her hair.

"Promise?" El asked, knowing his answer.

"Promise.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So that's the story. Obviously they live happily ever after because that's all I'm capable of and all they deserve. I hope everyone liked it. I certainly enjoyed writing it. And I didn't include any smut, which I was proud of myself for, because you know I wanted to in places, haha! A few things, there really are bricks with slogans and such on them around Wrigley Field and the one El read actually belongs to me. It has my name as well but I don't figure anyone here wants to or needs to know the real me. It's located in the Harry Caray section on Sheffield Ave. El's email address in this story is also real so if anyone wants to talk fics with me, hit me up at [sorryrightnumber@outlook.com](mailto:sorryrightnumber@outlook.com). I don't use it as my actual email address but it does belong to me. I greatly appreciate the support and kind words. I have a few ideas in the works so I hope to get started on one of those soon. Thanks again to everyone, I love you all. Over and out.

### **Author's Note:**

Surely something has to happen to move things along. Poor Eleven, never even having been hugged. That needs a remedy...

I hope this is starting out decently. I have plans for what will happen so it might take a little bit to get

revved up, though I don't see it being an overly long story. If needed I may change the rating in future chapters but I don't think it's going to have anything that wouldn't be considered as a T rating. Maybe some allusions to certain situations but no graphic detail. I hope that's fine.